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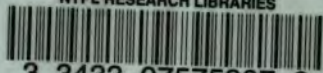
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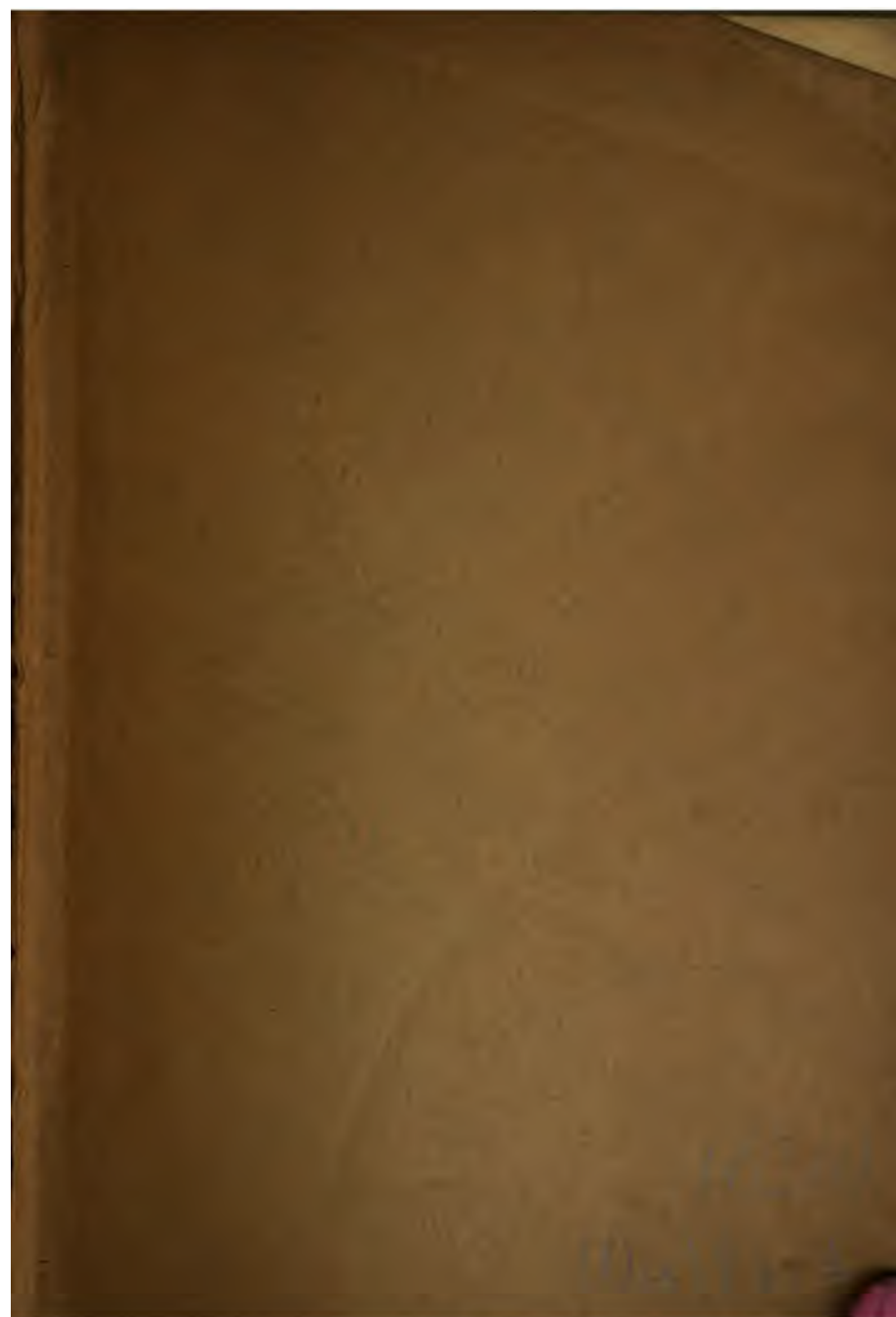
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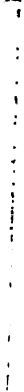
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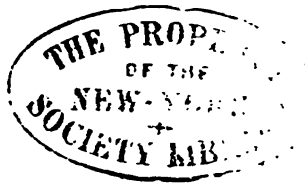
IVA KILDARE

A MATRIMONIAL PROBLEM

BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF "MR. SMITH," "THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER,"
ETC.

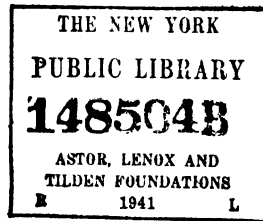


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IVA KILDARE :

A MATRIMONIAL PROBLEM.

CHAPTER I.

HE.

HE was one of those lanky, tawny, irresistible creatures who go straight to the hearts of women in a way that is perfectly inexplicable, not to say positively maddening, to the eyes of the other sex.

He was not particularly handsome, he was not abnormally clever ; but he knew what to say, and how to look ; and when such knowledge is instinctive in the bosom of a gallant, pray what else is required of him from the fairest of the fair ?

See that sprightly miss just out of the school-room. She has been chatting away contentedly enough, and not at all shyly, with the lion of the evening—flattered by his notice, and by no means loth to prolong the occasion for it. He thinks she “appreciates” him ; and such gentry

love to be "appreciated". At any rate, Miss Blue-eyes enjoys the distinction Professor Barnacles' conversation bestows on her, and raps out her little pert questions and answers with a confidence that is not misplaced.

All is going well, when in a moment—in the twinkling of an eyelid—the scene changes. The great man perceives that he has lost his auditor; eyes and ears are gone from him; vague responses and vacant smiles have taken the place of that pretty *bon camaraderie* which was so enchanting before; and for the life of him he cannot imagine why.

What has happened?

Nothing.

It would be absurd to suppose that the metamorphosis took place because of—that it had anything whatever to do with the arrival of that tailor-made sprig who lounged lazily by a few minutes before, and who now supports his length against the doorway.

The sprig exchanged a glance with miss as he passed; and she has been upon the fidget ever since.

Still, it would be an insult to her understanding—to the understanding of any intelligent being—to credit her with preferring the jabber of a noodle to his own witty, piquant *badinage*. He has been putting forth his best, and feels that

his best is worthy of him. Good heavens ! that such pearls should have been cast before—oh, yes, he mentally finishes the proverb to its bitter end, as the conviction is at length forced upon his amazed and sickened soul that the race is no more to the strong now than it ever was.

It would have been the same, honoured sir, indeed it would, if you had been talking to the girl's mother, or grandmother.

You think they would have known better ? Not they ! True, they would not so artlessly have betrayed themselves—being older, more wary, and better versed in the *convenances*. They would have been more adroit in manipulating the turn of the wheel ; have continued to work the muscles of the face and inflections of the voice long after the mainspring within had given way with a snap ; so that their surfeit of you and your conversation, and the dropping away of their interest, would have been concealed beneath a decent and decorous exterior ; but do not flatter yourself that in reality, in their heart of hearts, the stately dames prefer your rounded periods and well-chosen themes to the prattling of that simple boy. Nature has bestowed on him one double-distilled drop out of a bottle fast corked to you, and all your contempt and wrath, all your fuming and spluttering, will not rob him of his portion, nor procure it for yourself.

No one was ever angry with Reggie Goffe, whatever he did—that is to say, seriously, protractedly angry. Seldom a day passed that he did not provoke indignation and protest, that he did not stir up some sleeping dog which any one else would have known to let lie, but whose peaceful pose was irresistible to him. Then who so innocently amazed and guiltless as Reggie? *He* go about to affront his cousin Julia? He would not vex Julia for the world. *He* fly in the teeth of his aunt's known wishes and expressed commands? The offender was any one rather than himself.

Or else he was so penitent, so subdued and meek when absolutely brought to book, that the hardest hearts must needs melt before his anxious, pathetic eyes.

When and how Reggie had learnt to look pathetic no one could tell, but the knowledge to him was invaluable. He took it into almost daily use at one period of his life.

At that time he was not very strong—indeed, his constitution was by no means robust, though he treated it, if the truth were told, as though it were of cast-iron—but he would wear a gentle, pained expression when health was spoken of, and had a fashion of appearing to drink in with avidity the admonitions of the sympathetic which was never found to fail.

Such coddling and fussing as then went on! Such open care as was taken that the dear boy (Reggie was a "dear boy" to every woman over thirty) should have the fire side of the dinner-table on cold nights, or the shelter of the snug brougham instead of the draughty omnibus on the long drives to and from the country balls!

Reggie took it all with placid gratitude; he liked warm corners and feminine companionship. He said nothing about the wild nights he was out with the fishermen, tossing about from dusk to dawn, when the takes were good, and he the merriest of the crew.

When he came to grief, as he did times without number, riding madly in the hunting-field, or tramping the moors along tracks unknown, he knew when the moment had come to turn his scars to account. They were never disclosed prematurely nor unnecessarily. They were reserved as wares to be traded upon.

As for luck, all the women would tell you that poor dear Reggie Goffe was the most illused person on the face of the earth by Dame Fortune. He was always having to turn his back on the sunny side of life. If all the world were in for a good thing, he was out of it. If the stream were flowing in one direction, he and none other must needs breast it. When the London season was in full swing,

this one hapless mortal was hard and fast in rural quarters ; when the string snapped, and set loose the gathered mass, he got his leave. It never seemed as if he had aught but buffets from Fate.

And he pitied himself so tenderly, and asked for the pity of others so confidingly (looking his best and nicest, and making inferior men bite their lips and wonder how the deuce he did it), that no one ever thought of questioning why the grievances which were shared by many others should be so much more appalling to him than to them.

When Reggie was not pathetic he was dangerous. As long as his humour found vent in soft complaints, it was like the harmless sheet lightning dissipating itself all over the sky ; but, as when this ceases to play, there is worse in the wind, so, when our young gentleman was silent, was he plotting. He was deadly in mischief.

" But then," murmured old Mrs. Goodenough apologetically, " the poor boy knows no better. He has never had any training. He told me so himself. I remonstrated with him the other day when really he was *too* bad, inciting my grandchildren to all sorts of mischievous pranks, making even dear little Gwen quite beside herself—my dear, the schoolroom was a perfect

pandemonium ! poor Mademoiselle shrieking in vain !—I did speak very seriously to Reggie, and then I was quite sorry after it. He was so grieved and ashamed ; said he had never had any little sisters and brothers, never any home to be called a home ; poor darling ”—her wrinkled, benevolent countenance working suspiciously at the bare recollection—“ it ended in *my* begging *his* forgiveness, and I am sure I shall never be so *cruel* to him again.”

This was Reggie at his simplest. Properly worked up, it was extraordinary what masterpieces he would achieve, the while his gentle, serious, sunburnt face diverted all suspicion. Girls who had never been known to have a will of their own, would on a sudden strike for mastery, and battle for their rights when the Reggie poison began to work in the veins. He had a knack of making the most barefaced requests with an air so natural that it would have baffled an inquisitor-general to find out what he really thought. Those who began by being most angry were the soonest disarmed ; the indignant matrons and elder sisters who cried out at his unparalleled impudence, only needed to be themselves its object to soften as though oil had been poured into their wounds.

CHAPTER II.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER.

WE now know why Iva Kildare was so bitterly angry with Reggie one day and so indulgent towards him the next.

"What's the use of talking to that boy?" Iva addressed her mother, the flame having burnt itself out. "Everything you say rolls like water off a duck's back. He means no harm. And though he really would provoke a saint sometimes, I don't believe he can help it. It's *in* him. If Reggie were to behave like other mortals, we should not know it was Reggie."

"Precisely. And that would be a terrible loss!" Lady Tilbury, who had all an Irish-woman's quickness of repartee, snorted ironically as she spoke; but Iva was not taken in by the snort. She and her mother were "pals". That peculiarly expressive word which has come into vogue of recent years, applied distinctly to Lady Tilbury and the one daughter who bore the name of her first husband, and

whose likeness to the lover of her youth would have been in itself sufficient excuse for the tender freedom which existed between them.

Towards her younger children, the three moonfaced schoolgirls who had appeared on the scene since her second union with the eligible and elderly Sir Thomas Tilbury (now also defunct), the widow was a wholesome restraining influence ; a kindly, orthodox, arbitrary parent ; at times a trifle exacting and unreasonable ; still on the whole as comfortable a mother to get along with as any in the neighbourhood—but towards Iva she was soft, very soft.

Alike Irish by birth—for Captain Kildare and his wife had both been natives of the Sister Isle—the two were always sharpening their wits upon each other ; fencing with foils, and enjoying the exercise. It exhilarated them. Lady Tilbury looked as young as her daughter, with a roguish sparkle in her eye ; matron and maid had the same eyes—wet blue, overhung by a fringe of dark lashes (people said that her ladyship's Irish eyes could have landed a third husband for her on more than one occasion had she been so minded)—while the rich bloom which lit up Iva's rounded cheeks had its counterpart, only a single shade deepened, in her mother's.

Both had the same low, broad, white brow ; and the tendrils which clustered round it in the one case clung as softly, if not quite as thickly, in the other.

"She has me nose, too, and me mouth, that was always thought me greatest beauty." In confidential moments, when her heart was warm and open, the great county lady could not remember to be careful about certain clinging accents of her youth ; otherwise it was a common remark that Lady Tilbury was really almost—really she almost spoke like other people. Iva would merrily gibe at her mother for the care with which Sir Thomas's wife had learnt to talk as like Sir Thomas as possible during the dozen years of his reign, and Iva herself loved nothing better than to break out into the richest brogue her native land could afford, whenever she had the chance. Ordinary intercourse, however, was carried on in ordinary language.

"I say, mother"—after a pause of some duration, during which the elder lady had been busily writing, while the younger mused, Iva again lifted her voice, and resumed the conversation—"you know we want Reggie for the balls?"

Pen in hand, her mother looked round, made an impatient movement, half-opened her lips to speak, then, as though thinking better of it,

dipped into the inkstand, and wrote on. She did and she did not agree with the want.

"We have just *got* to have him," proceeded Iva emphatically.

"Humph!"

"You know we have."

"I suppose so. Yes."

"Then we can't bother with quarrelling. Besides, as likely as not, from very devilry —"

"Devilry! That's not a word —"

"I can't help the word; I don't know any other for what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—devilry."

"Well, well; 'devilry,' if you will have it. But mind, Iva, only to me, your mother; don't be so free in your language —"

"My dear thing! Free in my language! I wish you heard other girls —"

"I wish nothing of the kind," said Lady Tilbury, with her severest air. "It's shocking; and Sir Thomas always told me to be particular with his daughters; that he wouldn't have them grow up 'slangy and stabley'—those were his very words. I wasn't to let them into the stables without either him or me —"

She was off on her hobby-horse, but Iva caught the rein.

"I want to talk about Reggie; not about girls and their slang. What I wanted to say was this—that if Reggie finds out that we have begun to take him *au sérieux*, and be offended with anything he says or does, pure devilry will make him seize the opportunity—perhaps the very day before a ball, or on the morning of it—to stir us up. He likes nothing so much as to have some one in the huff with him; he always did, as a boy; and though of course it did not matter then, it—we can't have that kind of thing now."

"Of course we can't." The writer wiped her pen, and knitted her brows in meditation. She began to perceive that she had best defer her correspondence, and give the matter in question more of her attention than it had previously seemed to demand. "If only Reggie would behave himself!" she remarked tentatively.

"That he *never* will; but I think between us we may keep him in hand, if we are on our guard, and work together. Look here, dear; there is one thing you must remember"—eagerly—"it is this—not to be 'drawn' by him when he proposes for us to do things that he knows you will not allow, and that we should never think of asking for. Just laugh, as if it were a joke."

"But he is so outrageous; you know, Iva, Sir Thomas ——"

"Never understood Reggie in the least. We do; and we know what he always was, and will be. You are fond of him yourself."

Lady Tilbury was silent.

"We all are; and he is fond of us. I am certain that if anything were to happen to any of us, if we were in any real trouble, Reggie would come out so strong ——"

"That he would! Oh, yes, I believe you are right there."

"And though he is so tiresome and provoking, he is not really malicious."

"Malicious! Dear me, no! Who could ever think of calling poor Reggie 'malicious'?"

"And though he is five and twenty, he is ridiculously young for his age. Sometimes he seems an absolute boy, in spite of his age and height, and his long moustache."

"That moustache is a regular take in!" cried Lady Tilbury, suddenly turning round, and waking up. "When I saw it, and saw how it had grown since he was last here, I fancied—you may laugh, Iva, if you will, but I did fancy somehow that Reggie must have sobered down. I thought: 'How sensible he looks!' And I was quite formal and serious

with him for the whole of his first call, when I had him alone."

"He told us so. He was tremendously pleased."

"Laughing in his sleeve, I suppose." A slight accession of colour on her ladyship's cheek.

"I think he was laughing a little—but not disagreeably; really and truly not disagreeably. He would have known better than to come to *us* with any rudeness to *you*," said Iva quickly and affectionately. "But it was not in Reggie to let pass such a chance for making his way. He said he did not know when he had had such a delightful, intelligent conversation ——"

"The rascal! He *was* making fun of me."

It was the quick-witted Irishwoman who spoke, not the mistress of Tilbury Court.

"Don't you ever let out that I repeated it to you," exhorted Iva. "Mind you don't. It would be such an opening for a grievance—and that is the very thing we want to avoid. And, mother, if you *could* keep up the polite and serious attitude! The longer you *can* do that the better."

"Of course, I can do it if I choose, Iva."

Iva's mother bridled indignantly. "You always speak to me, your mother, as if I were one of the children!" continued she, her sense of

affront deepening. "I can be as reserved and dignified as anybody."

"Not with Reggie!" Iva smiled, then swept up the room and kissed her parent, rubbing the two cheeks together in a way that was all her own. "You are as bad as any of us about Reggie. He gets round you ——"

"That he does not."

"Oh, yes, he does; and makes you do what he wants: then trades on your permission, and goes beyond it; sneaks up to you for forgiveness, and gets it; comes back to us with a grin to say it is all right; makes fools of the whole of us ——"

"He is a hypocritical, mischief-making, unprincipled ——"

"Not at all. And you don't think it. It is easy to call him names behind his back, yet if we were to see his grey knickerbockers under the trees yonder, and he were to come up to the window—he has no idea of not coming straight to this window, though he knows it is your private sitting-room, and that no one else (for of course *I* don't count) ever presumes to invade it—listen to me now, mother—listen, madam, and contradict me if you dare!—if Reggie Goffe's long moustache were to poke in through that window at this very moment, you would jump up from your chair, and say

'Oh, Reggie!' as pleased as possible; and if the luncheon gong were to sound an hour after, Reggie would stroll into the dining-room after you, and you would never even have asked him!"

"Never have asked him?"

"You would simply have risen and talked on, looking over your shoulder for him to follow. Of course, every one knows what that means."

"What does it mean, Impudence?"

"Why, that he is a favourite, and may come and go as he pleases in Lady Tilbury's house."

"And if I were to treat him in any other way, I know who would be the first to cry out. It would be: 'What a shame to begin to make a stranger of Reggie Goffe at this time of day!' 'How can you be so unkind?' 'What has poor Reggie done to displease you?'"

"While 'poor Reggie' himself would look so limp and crestfallen that the whole house would be miserable on his behalf," cried Iva, letting go her mother's shoulder, and suddenly bursting into a ringing laugh. "'Tis no use, mother; we simply couldn't do it. An hour after such a course of treatment had begun, we should all be ready to fall upon his neck weeping, and he would be in the seventh heaven. Afterwards things would be ten times as bad as they are now. No, you must not swing the

pendulum too far. Be as kind as ever, as hospitable as ever, only if you *can*—now, don't flout me, my bonnie Irishwoman"—cheek-rubbing again in vogue—"if your dear, warm, jolly heart will allow you, try to remember that you are Lady Tilbury, and that little Reggie Goffe is six foot one, and has a long moustache."

CHAPTER III.

THREE OTHERS.

IN the room just over that in which the above was going on, three schoolgirls, let loose from lessons for the twelve o'clock recess, were also holding a confabulation.

"Mamma and Iva are talking in the boudoir," observed Mabel sententiously. The Tilbury girls, Sir Thomas's daughters, called their mother "mamma". Iva had made them do so. Iva liked a distinction to be drawn between her property and that which belonged to Tilbury Court generally.

"They have been talking ever since I went down to fetch the slate rag," contributed her sister Marianne. "I heard them as I passed; and they have gone on, *hum-hum*, ever since."

"I know; at least, I have heard them ever since we came out on the balcony. What a silly you were to go and forget that slate rag again, miss! You knew this was its washing day; and I was so afraid Mademoiselle

would stop our leaving off at twelve, if she got angry about it. You know she threatened she would."

"What are mamma and Iva talking about, I wonder?" Maud, the eldest of the three, found slate rags and Mademoiselle insipid; she did not think them likely to form topics of conversation in the boudoir; and the fifteen-year-old young lady has secret covetings after the unknown talk of her elders with which she is seldom credited.

"I can tell you one thing, or rather one person—only you must guess who; the door was a little open, and I had to stand and fold the rag, so I couldn't help listening, and I heard his name over and over again." Betwixt her desire to impart her important piece of information and a sense of its having been acquired in a not altogether legitimate manner, the speaker, Marianne, grew a trifle incoherent; but there was no Mademoiselle lying in wait to snap at trifles. "You guess?" concluded she, looking at each auditor in turn.

"Guess? That's easy enough," said Maud contemptuously. "Reggie, of course! Whenever they talk now, it's about Reggie—I mean ever since he came home this time."

"Then why did you say you wondered?" retorted Marianne, whom the contempt natur-

ally aggrieved. "You say you 'wonder,' and when I tell you ——"

"I wonder what they are saying about him. I wonder why it is always when they are alone by themselves that they talk of Reggie. He is our friend as much as theirs."

"And they used not to mind." It was now Mabel's turn. "They never minded in the least; mamma used to say: 'Bother Reggie! Take him away, some of you, I want to get my letters written,' when he came in the mornings. And Iva wouldn't come down if she had got her frock off and were lying on the sofa in her bedroom reading a novel. If she were told Reggie was in the drawing-room, she would only read on, and say some one else could go to him."

"Oh, I think she always went, unless she knew he was going to stay on," from Marianne.

"No, she did not." Maud's memory was more tenacious and she had been on the alert sooner than the others. "She did not always go. Even if she did, she would groan out: 'Here, then, get out my things, and bring me some hot water'. She never would let Reggie see her except in her best things ——"

"O Maud! *that's* not true! He has gone fishing with us, and nutting with us ——"

"That was long ago. Since Iva has been

grown up, though she says Reggie is a mere boy, and makes believe to snub him and scold him, she takes very good care he does not catch her with her hair untidy, or her old hat on. I know when she thinks he's about, by the way she wears her big black hat even in the garden, because he once said she suited a big hat."

"Do you think she is in love with him, then?"

Mabel's round yokel face took suddenly an expression of solemn interest. "Just fancy!"

"Sh—h! Take care!" The elder sister looked round with quick alarm. "Do take care what you say," proceeded she, frowning. "I never said a word about being 'in love'. It's only a way that grown-ups have, directly a man's a man. In a little while I daresay *I* shall begin ——"

"He, he, he!" tittered her sisters, their delight at the idea none the less keen because it was obviously contraband. "Then it will be our turn—Mab's and mine—to haul out your best things from the wardrobe if you are lying in your bedroom and mamma says: 'Go and let your sister know,' as she does now, if she wants Iva's help with visitors. How those two do stick by each other! Mamma never will go to make calls without Iva, ever since

she has been 'out'. Will it be the same with you when you are out, Maud?"

"Of course. Iva will be married by then, and I shall go about with mamma everywhere. I shall have my name printed on her visiting-cards. It will be 'Lady Tilbury, Miss Tilbury,' instead of 'Lady Tilbury, Miss Kildare'. Much prettier, *I* think. Nobody but we ourselves have different names on the same card, and I daresay people think it very odd."

"Do you think Iva will marry Reggie, Maud?" Ever since her brain had been illumined by the idea, which opened vistas of possibilities the most delightful, Marianne had kept silence, pondering.

"Oh, dear, no; he has nothing to marry upon."

With superior wisdom, Maud loftily waved an arm, disposing of the suggestion. "I know," continued she, nodding sagely, "because I heard old General Dove and Mrs. Birch talking, and they said Reggie Goffe had nothing in the world but his pay, and that he would have to go out to India to live upon it."

"But has Iva got no money of her own? Couldn't she ——?" suggested Mabel, and paused, while Marianne also drew near, and hung upon her sister's answer.

"Nonsense!" said Maud brusquely.

A few words may now be added about the old country seat and its inmates, to whom our readers have been somewhat unceremoniously introduced.

Tilbury Court was a fine, substantial building, square and solid, with rows of windows which nightly gleamed in the setting sun, for, wonderful to relate, although built at a time when it seemed that the principal object aimed at was to hem in by this or that obstruction every dwelling of any pretensions, Sir Thomas Tilbury's Somersetshire residence lay open to the surrounding country on every side, and its principal rooms faced the south-west.

Beneath their casements stretched a level park, dotted here and there with clumps of beeches ; and a meandering stream, broad and shallow, wound in and out among these, making pleasant banks, and cool inviting nooks for Lady Tilbury's noted breed of cattle to rest in during leisure intervals.

A low ha-ha separated their pasture ground from the flowering lawns and terraces of the mansion on one side, and a rich growth of luxuriant shrubs formed a belt for its outbuildings on the other.

Altogether, it was a stately, spacious domain, as well suited to winter cold as summer heat—an abode in which life moved along on easy

wheels, where nature was beneficent, and art had only sought to supplement, not to supplant nature.

Lady Tilbury had breathed a sigh of relief untold, when it was found by Sir Thomas's will that she would not have to leave, on his demise, her home in the sunny southern country. He had never told her so explicitly; since, like many another as broad and sturdy as himself, he had never contemplated dying before, as he himself would have said, "well on in the eighties"; so that, although hoping for the best, it was music in her ears to hear her lawyer read aloud in his singsong, nasal, legal tones that although the family seat descended to Sir Thomas's eldest daughter, or failing her to the next in succession, his wife had a life-interest in the estate, and was to remain undisturbed in possession thereof.

As perhaps the place had a good deal to do with a certain halo invested by herself round Sir Thomas's bald head in the days when she, a belle, and irresistible in her early widowhood, accepted him (being ardently implored to do so), it is hardly to be wondered at that in middle life—she was little over forty when left to stand alone for the second time—Lady Tilbury was in an agony till the point was settled.

"Where should we go, Iva and I?" cried she,

ignoring the fact that she had other daughters. "Iva asthore," and the accent came out rich and sweet, "your mother will take care of her darling, go where she may"—but it turned out that she had no need to go anywhere.

After that, not only did Sir Thomas's lady reign on as she had done before at the ancestral seat, but Iva, who took a distinct step forward after the thrilling crisis was over, reigned also.

The two could not forget—though, to do them justice, no inkling of this was suffered to escape or was ever surmised by the others equally concerned—that they had no territorial rights over the soil, such as Maud, Mabel, and Marianne had. They would look at each other meaningfully when certain things were said. They held consultations from which all outsiders were excluded. Lady Tilbury felt awkward for some time after her husband's death when she had to give audience to Mr. Stokes, the farm-steward, or Grimes, the gamekeeper. She fancied they regarded her as a interloper, and were more deferential to the younger girls, the fat-faced Miss Tilburys, than to her own slim, sparkling Iva—the Irish girl without a sixpence. It was not for many months—till even a year and more had gone by—that she came to perceive no significance in their references to Miss Maud

or her sisters, no difference between their salutations to them and to Iva.

That time had passed ; and Lady Tilbury was herself again. Iva emerged from the schoolroom, was taken to town, presented at Court, danced at a few balls, and returned home. She did not greatly affect the metropolis.

Perhaps it did not make quite so much of her as in the heat of her youth and the flush of her beauty she had secretly expected. It is very hard to make one's mark on the London of to-day. The throng is so dense—the number of pretty girls so great—feathers and frills convert faces and forms so strangely, until the plainest look “ smart,” and the least distinguished attract the eye—that poor, pretty Iva, dreaming perchance that she would bring the world to her feet, as a couple of Irish girls once did in bygone times, was fairly mortified and affronted on more than one occasion.

So she took a distaste to the whole thing.

Without possessing more than the simple vanity of youth and inexperience, she had certainly supposed—imagined—pictured to herself scenes which were not only never realised, but which she came to perceive could only have been devised by an humiliating ignorance. Thus, to her original vexation was added a new ingredient.

She hated herself for being such a simpleton.

When her mother exclaimed and conjectured, it is true that she made game of their joint disappointment—rather bitter game—and carried it off with a high hand. But she would not go to London a second year. She would wait till she knew its ways better, and could stand more securely on her own feet.

And she had been telling Lady Tilbury so one day, when Reggie Goffe came on leave from his regiment, and it turned out that since last seen by any one he had grown a long yellow moustache.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD HOUSE.

JUST without the lodge gates of Tilbury Court there was assembled a small collection of odd, detached houses, which was not exactly a village, but was called so for want of a better name.

It had no main street ; no whitewashed rows of cheerful shops and cottages ; no inn, nor even a public-house ; but the country road which ran through its midst was paved for a few hundred yards with rough cobbles, and the low walls of farmyards, with their accompanying outbuildings, abutted thereon.

There were also several neatly-thatched dwelling-houses of respectable pretensions, in front of which shrubs luxuriated, and created an air of retirement sufficient to induce the residence of people whose taste was for privacy.

There was a stumpy church, with a squat tower ; a post office ; and a trading establishment, which would have been known in Scotland as that of a "general merchant".

The whole nestled contentedly among trees and orchards, and the meandering stream which flowed through the wooded park of Tilbury Court passed beneath a bridge a little to the left, near enough to supply water for the wants of the community.

Thus far the village of Little Cary resembled many others of its kind familiar to the inhabitants of rural England; but it had one distinctive feature, in the shape of a huge grey wall, which reared itself upright from its very midst, and which never failed to excite the curiosity and interest of strangers.

"That's Old Cary Hall—Sir Philip Goffe's. Been in the family for two hundred years as it now stands." Drivers piloting parties of pleasure-seekers through the district in summer time, would turn round from their box-seats and point with their whips to the grey wall.

Then, in response to further interrogation: "No, sir; Sir Philip does not live in it. Nobody lives in it. The keys are at the farm; and the folk there open the windows, and keep fires in the rooms in wet weather. No, you can't get inside." A smack of the whip, and the speaker would settle himself on his seat again, not ill pleased to nip in the bud such a suggestion on the part of "foreigners". "No

one is allowed inside—not even in the garden. The orders are strict ; and though Sir Philip never comes, the nephew stops at the farm when he's home from his regiment, and you never can tell when he's about or not."

The party would drive on, having seen no more of Old Cary Hall than that one grim, fortress-like wall, and the gates which, further on, disclosed an overgrown avenue, quickly lost in foliage ; but had they penetrated within the barriers, they would have found a rare old structure—one of the finest specimens of Jacobean architecture in England, never having been added to or altered since its foundation in the seventeenth century.

A massive porch in front, probably once filled with benches, and the scene of many a jocund meeting, admitted visitors to the entrance hall, which, with its dark wainscoting, its raised dais at the upper end, and its huge carved oak screen at the other, was equally alive with memories of the past. Broad oak staircases, tapestried chambers, haunted turrets, all told the same tale of former grandeur—but alas ! also of present neglect.

Modern equipment was needed, and modern comfort.

No matter. Sir Philip would have liked to live in it. And as he could not live in it, he

would not go near it. It would have scorched his eyeballs to behold from day to day the silent quadrangle, the empty stables, the desolate gardens.

In his youth he had laughed over these ; vowed the place would not run away while he was having his fling elsewhere ; and confidently predicted that by the time he was ready to settle down, he would contrive, somehow or other, to find means of living at the home of his forefathers. All that had to be thought of in the meantime was to keep it from going to the rats ; and this, if it were aired and ventilated, could easily be done.

Everybody had agreed with Sir Philip, and made no doubt he knew his own business. He knew what he was talking about. A wealthy marriage would put all straight, even long arrears of neglect ; and as the modern expedient of letting family places, when convenient to the purse, had not come into vogue forty years ago—being only resorted to in exceptional cases—it would have been considered highly *infra dig.* on the part of the young man if, on first coming into his kingdom, he had handed it over to others even as a temporary residence.

As years passed, however, and Old Cary Hall still stood vacant, sombre, and neglected, it was said of its owner that he ought to be

doing something. Either he should buckle to, woo and win his heiress, or rout about in money-making lands and come home a nabob.

Failing in either quest, it would be well that he should pocket his pride, and advertise his property to be let on lease. What good was it to him?

Then Sir Philip did let the shootings, one year after another, until it came to be forgotten that they belonged to him, and were looked upon as Mr. Minching's—Mr. Minching being a Stock Exchange gentleman, who with one or two others rented shootings, but did not care to be troubled with the houses pertaining thereto.

The party put up at a good inn four miles off, and were very welcome there—more so, perhaps, than Sir Philip Goffe would have been—seeing that Sir Philip would only have ordered a mutton chop and a glass of home-brewed ale, whereas the London gentlemen, if they did bring their own wines, paid royally for corkage, and liked a full dinner and a brimming breakfast.

Not being Somersetshire born, it was perhaps natural that the beefy-faced landlord and his smirking spouse should devoutly hope within their practical bosoms that the absentee would remain wherever he might be, rather

than return to oust such jolly, jocular, lucrative substitutes.

Still Old Cary Hall fronted the world in valiant, mournful, uncomplaining solitude, as though it would have said : "I blame no one. I wait. Time is nothing to me."

Time, however, was a good deal to Sir Philip, who found the years flying past, robbing him on this side and that, yet bringing him no nearer to the mirage which was ever dangling yet ever dissolving in front ; until at last the gay youth with all life before him, gave place by slow but sure degrees to the peevish, misanthropic, embittered man, still drifting aimlessly about the world, with no foothold anywhere, no duties, no claims—or so he would have told you—and no prospects of a future that should wipe out the recollections of the past.

At sixty, Sir Philip's friends began to wonder how Sir Philip had contrived to make such a mess of his affairs.

One and another could recall him as trim, upright, and *débonnaire* a youngster as his nephew was now. A favourite with the women, too. Never put himself about for them ; never sat in their pockets, as Reggie did ; yet nevertheless had them all running after him like the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

Reggie had his way, and Sir Philip his ; and each alike succeeded. That was to say, poor Sir Philip had succeeded once ; but—here the speaker would shake his head—Phil was a different sort of fellow now. That confounded white elephant of a place sucked his life-blood like a vampire. He ought to have got rid of Old Cary Hall long ago ; it was all very fine to stick to it for old sake's sake—very fine and creditable and all that—but family pride might be carried too far.

After all, a man ought to be his own number one ; Sir Philip's well-meaning sponsors would shrug their shoulders, stating the case from an abstract, impartial point of view ; until it came to pass that at length even the staunchest forsook his cause, and came to regard his adherence to out-of-date *noblesse oblige* as a silly prejudice, musty and worthless as his own cobwebs.

All but one—Sir Philip's nephew Reginald.

CHAPTER V.

"IT IS LITTLE BETTER THAN A ROTTEN FUNGUS."

HITHERTO only a single side of Reggie's character has been presented to our readers, but there was one person—possibly only one—who knew the other, and this formed a link between the pair of men which not infrequently gave the neighbourhood a theme for discussion or meditation.

"Strange that those two should get on together as they do," worthy old Dr. Stevens, the retired surgeon, and father of the place in point of age, would soliloquise, leaning over the ivied wall, and tapping it with his stick; "strange, strange! In the natural course of events the nephew will succeed the uncle, and might be supposed to take some interest in his heritage. He sees it going to the dogs; going?—it's gone already! Year by year the moss thickens on the doorsteps, and the weeds choke the gravel—yet Sir Philip cares not a brass farthing"—Sir Philip made no confidences—"and by the time this young man comes in for

Old Cary Hall the place will be uninhabitable from sheer decay. It might be remedied *now*; in another twenty years or so it will be too late. Sir Philip, never coming near the place, trifling away his time, and shirking his responsibilities in foreign lands, may shut his eyes to the ruin going on here," continued the old man, sorrowfully regarding the thick, interlaced branches which overhung the stream—no longer a rippling, sunlit stream, as when it showed between the grassy banks of Lady Tilbury's park, but a deep, sullen current; "one can understand it of *him*; but I should have expected a brisk young fellow like Reginald to look at things differently. He ought to make a fuss; insist upon something being done. As there seems no chance of the old possessors of the soil ever being in a position to take up residence here again, it is their duty to try and get rid of the place—dispose of it in open market, if need be. Any purchaser would be better than none at all. And it is quite on the cards that some of those rich Americans who are overrunning us just now, would be ready to snap at a place like Old Cary Hall, full of tapestry and heirlooms, panelled chambers, and ghostly staircases. Sir Philip might start by asking a fancy price—letting it be known that he was willing to be *tempted*; then if he

failed to get that, have it put about that he was not a marrying man, and had no fancy for dull country life. The real facts of the case *might* leak out; it *might* be known that he was forced to part because it was impossible for him to keep; but his poverty is no secret as it is; there would be no further betrayal of it in disposing of the estate. O Sir Philip, you ought to sell, you ought indeed!" The white head, with its old-mannish wideawake hat, shook admonishingly at the exile, and the silver-headed cane tapped the wall with rueful taps.

"I'm sorry for you, my good sir, even though I never knew you," continued the old gentleman, gently luxuriating in his sorrow; "you and I have never come across each other, and I daresay you would say I was a newcomer in these parts, though I have been here for fifteen years; but I should like to see these great gates opening and shutting, the avenue in yonder cleared and swept, with carriage wheel-marks upon it; I should like to see smoke rising from the vineries, clothes flying on the washing-green, horses feeding in the paddocks. Best of all, Sir Philip, would it be to see that great gloomy house open to the sunshine, cheered by light and warmth, echoing to the sounds of children's voices—a happy English home, with the blessing of the Lord upon it."

Pleased with his own exordium, the old man raised his hands to suit the desired benediction, and the next moment started so violently as to let fall the stick which was poised above his head, and which hit him smartly on the shoulder as it fell. It seemed such an extraordinary thing to be accosted at the moment by young Mr. Goffe that the thin blood flushed in his cheeks from a confused sense of guilt and impropriety as he turned to respond to the young man's greeting.

Reggie shifted his gun to his left shoulder (he had been shooting at Tilbury Court), and held out his hand.

"Good old wall that to rest upon, doctor," observed he cheerfully. "About all it is good for—eh? What were you cocking your stick at—rats—weasels?"

"No, Mr. Reginald; I—I was not looking for—for anything." Then the tremulous tones became a trifle more steady. "I was but standing a moment to see the sun go down behind the turret yonder. This is a favourite peep of mine. It is the only place from where you can get any view of the Hall, and it is only by clambering up the bank here that you get it. But I know just the bit of broken wall ——"

"So do I." Reggie laughed and nodded. "I thought no one else did. So, it appears,

thought you. It often amuses me to hear people, passing along the road below, wondering what the old place is like, and wishing they could catch a glimpse of it. *That* of course they can't do by the time they become inquisitive, which is only so soon as they see the wall yonder," pointing with his finger; "and I don't believe any one has ever been let into the secret of this opening. We ought to have a photograph from this point," concluded he, laying down his gun, and looking in front of him.

("He is not sensitive. I'll feel his pulse," cogitated the ex-doctor.) "If I were you—or rather, if I were your uncle Sir Philip—I would have more photographs than one taken, Mr. Reginald," observed he significantly. "I would have the place photographed from top to toe—towers and turrets, stableyard and farmyard. I would cut some of the timber down ——"

"Ah!" ejaculated Reggie.

"Only a tree or two; those that impede the view, sir; none to speak of—none to mention. Those trees in there would have been the better of a thinning long ago; but that could be left to—what I was going to say, Mr. Reginald, is this: Why do you not suggest to your uncle that—that—in short ——"

"In short—what, Dr. Stevens?" A dry change of note, a watchful eye.

"He will never be able to live in it, sir." The old man's stick began to tap again nervously.

"He knows that perhaps as well as—possibly a good deal better than—you or I, doctor."

"It is very bad for a house to remain untenanted; it is indeed, Mr. Reginald. Mould gathers on the walls; and however well it may be looked after by outside people, it is not the same as if it were in use. Mrs. Hodge does her part, I know; but you *can't* keep a house liveable without living in it; you simply can't do it, Mr. Reginald."

Authority once more stirred the worthy medico's ancient vitals; he delivered his fiat with unction.

"But you said just now that my uncle would never be able to live in it."

"*He* won't; some one else might."

"Some one else? Do you mean—me?"

"Oh, no, sir!" It was impossible not to smile at the suggestion. "You would be worse put to it than Sir Philip."

"So I should say—except that I have often thought I might have some owl-shooting and batting if I were to spend a night inside."

"Lor', Mr. Reginald! But you young men

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think everything a joke. So long as you get your shooting and your fishing, you don't care for anything else," querulously. "I daresay, now, you never give Old Cary Hall a thought once you are off and away with your fine regiment."

"Oh, yes, I do ; I look forward to jolly times at the farm, always. I wouldn't go anywhere else for the world when I get my leave."

"Well, sir, it's not for me to say. Never having been brought up among the aristocracy, I can't be expected to know their ways among themselves ; but I do feel this, Mr. Reginald, I feel it very strongly, that for the sake of others, if not for his own—for the sake of the mouths it would feed—a house like this"—pointing—"ought to keep a couple of dozen poor families going, with the work it would supply if properly inhabited, whereas it is now little better than a rotten fungus ——"

"Eh?"

"I mean no disrespect to the place, sir ; as fine a place, as noble a place, as can be found in any county of England. I'll be bound to say none of our dukes or marquises could boast a grander, more historic ——"

"Tut-tut, doctor ! That's going too far. Without being exactly a rotten fungus, there are places all over the shop that could give

points to Old Cary Hall. But you were saying you don't like to see it standing empty?"

"That is so, sir." The speaker emitted a quavering cough behind his hand, and subjoined: "The entail was cut off in your grandfather's time, I believe, Mr. Reginald?"

"It was. What has that to do with it?"

"It makes it possible for Sir Philip to ——"

"To sell it?"

The old man bowed.

"Then let me tell you, Dr. Stevens, that rather than sell those grey walls, my uncle would sell the shirt off his back, the shoes off his feet. Rather than see another man walking in at that door with the air of a master, another man's beasts in those stables and paddocks, another man's wife and children kneeling in our old pew in the chapel, rubbing with their feet *our* brasses in the aisles, and leaning their elbows on *our* names carved upon the benches—rather than let one stick or stone pass from us while we can hold them (even though to hold them is all that we can do), we would meet together in a spot we know of, and we would have this in our pockets"—there was a small silver matchbox in his hand; he had been feeling for it as he spoke—"d'ye see this, doctor?"

A smile, what the old man described to

himself as a deadly smile, accompanied the words. His blood—it was poor and thin—ran cold; he looked stupidly at the thing; it seemed to him a perfect dynamo. And then his eyes crept up to Reggie's face again.

"That's about it," said the latter cheerfully. The effect of his words mollified him. "Best let well alone, Dr. Stevens. You don't want a bonfire some fine night, do you? Though it is drawing on to Guy Fawkes Day, and Old Cary Hall would light all the country round."

The old man muttered a few words inaudibly.

"Oh, it's all right," continued young Goffe, carelessly dropping the matchbox into his pocket again, where his companion almost expected to hear it explode in violent combustion. "We shan't do it, I daresay. It would be a nuisance, and get talked about. It was only in case"—he eyed his recent adviser with a momentary renewal of the deadly smile—"in case officious people provoked us. My uncle and I like to keep our affairs private. And to own the truth, Dr. Stevens, you are not the first who has hinted at a desire to have a finger in them."

"Indeed, Mr. Reginald, indeed ——"

"With the best intentions in the world, I don't doubt. But, you see, we don't like it; and, perhaps, now that you understand that, in future you will abstain from the attempt. I

beg your pardon, sir, if I have spoken roughly." The old man, humbled and crestfallen, was now gathering himself together for departure, and looking about for the stick which should have been his support. He looked so feeble, so harmless, that a sudden shame seized the other.

"I say, I have been shockingly rude!" cried he. "I—I ——" And as he stammered and stuttered, a carriage drove past.

In it were Lady Tilbury and Iva.

CHAPTER VI.

LADY TILBURY THINKS SHE WILL HAVE TO TAKE
CARE.

"WHAT were you and old Father Stevens talking about?" demanded the latter next day. "You both looked quite caught. Been consulting him about your precious health, Reggie?"

"Does he still practise, then?" said Reggie. "If I had known that, I would have gone down to him to-day with my broken finger-nail."

"Oh, your broken finger-nail! Is it a new finger-nail or the old one? Start something else, Reggie, please. The old one did duty long enough."

"No, but really—really it's very sore. It's a new one—quite new—and confoundedly sore. I believe the nail is coming off. Just look here; look what a queer colour it is! No nail ought to be that colour."

"And suppose it does come off?"

"Do look at it; you would not like to have a nail like that yourself? It's beastly painful. I think I shall ask Lady Tilbury for some

plaister, or something. I'm sure it ought to be tied up ——"

"With your head as well—in a bag!" jeered Iva. "Oh, yes; go to my mother by all means! You will get pity, and sympathy, and croton oil, and ——"

"Croton oil!"

"Camphorated oil—some kind of oil. Why not croton? I know there is some stuff called that."

"Of course there is. One of our fellows had to be rubbed with it; and—O Lady Tilbury," as she entered the room, "here's Iva being so unkind to me. I have got a very bad finger, and she won't believe it hurts, and says I am to have croton oil rubbed in. Do come and look at the finger."

"And send for a doctor, quick," added Iva, who was seated on the window-ledge, swinging her feet; "do send, dear mother. Reggie does bear pain so well that he makes the very least of it, but I know he is suffering agonies! Shall I ring and tell them to send round to the stables to saddle the quickest horse—or had they not better take the dog-cart, so as to bring Dr. Thomson without losing time?"

"That's the way she laughs at me." Reggie looked plaintively round. "I never said it was 'agonies'—but Iva does exaggerate so. Now;

doesn't it really want plaister or something, Lady Tilbury?"

"Poor boy—yes. Iva is a bad-hearted *spalpeen*. Why, how did you manage to do this, Reggie? You have broken off the nail!"

"So I told her, but she wouldn't believe me." He shot a triumphant glance. "I knew it was broken. A stone fell on it yesterday, off that old wall Dr. Stevens and I were standing by when you passed. He dropped his stick, and I was picking it up for him, and the end of my gun somehow managed to knock one of the top stones off the wall."

"I suppose it really did hurt you, then?" Iva slipped off her seat, and advanced a pace nearer.

"Suppose? It jolly well did!" Reproachful indignation on the part of the injured one. "I had to bite my tongue not to squeak out, it came with such a crack."

"Why didn't you squeak out? It must have been the first time in your life you held your tongue when the chance was given you."

"Iva, my dear, don't be silly!" It was Lady Tilbury, of Tilbury Court, who spoke. Lady Tilbury did not like sham fights, unless she were retained on one side or the other, and in the present instance the belligerents appeared equal to conducting their combat by themselves. "Reggie, I am sure this finger ought to be

poulticed," continued the speaker in maternal accents. "If it throbs, that means inflammation, and ——"

"No, ma'am, it doesn't throb," resignedly.

"Would you try a bread-and-milk poultice? It could be made at once."

"What about a rag with some liniment? If I were to try that *first*?" suggested he; he did not add that a rag well saturated with a good old-fashioned remedy from the ample stores of his farmer's wife was now reposing in his waistcoat pocket, somewhat to the detriment of the silver matchbox.

He had pulled off the rag when approaching the house, preparatory to entering with *éclat*; but it had done its work; for though the blow had actually broken the nail, as he said, and caused some minutes of sharp pain and a night's uneasiness, the wounded digit was now so far well as to admit of playing its part in an interesting scene.

"Surely; you shall have it properly bound up," said Lady Tilbury, who had a turn for surgery, and loved to dabble in bandages; "I have a liniment. Iva, will you—no, I'll get it myself," moving off with a brisk step; "wait half a minute!" and she was gone.

"*How* nice!" said Iva. No two words could have expressed her feelings more concisely.

The sufferer rose and approached her.

"Just you feel how hot it is!" said he, catching her hand and laying it willy-nilly on the part affected. "You wouldn't be so beastly sarcastic if you had a red-hot finger."

"It is a *little* hot," owned she.

"Your cool hand draws out the heat; do leave it there a moment," said Reggie anxiously, and with his own disengaged member he held on hers. "How delightfully cool yours is!"

"Perhaps I am cool altogether on the subject."

"You are cool on any subject that affects me."

Iva nodded.

"You will be cool when I go away, I suppose?"

"Go away! You have only just come."

"I am going to India in the spring."

"The spring? That's all right. I was afraid you were going before the balls. We can't spare you till the winter balls are over."

"That's all I'm good for, is it? O Lady Tilbury, how awfully good of you!"—as the door opened—"I am so sorry to be a nuisance. And Iva has been saying nasty things to me the whole time you were away."

Lady Tilbury looked sharply from one to the other. "If I don't take care, those two will be falling in love," thought she.

CHAPTER VII.

"THEY'RE QUEER THINGS, THE BOYS!"

It was easy to say, "If I don't take care," but how on earth was Lady Tilbury to take care?

She could not shut Reggie Goffe out of the house, or Iva up in her room. She could not begin now to put a stop to his looking in at all hours, and searching round in all places. He had been accustomed to have the run of Tilbury Court from his youth up, and the roots of long habit were too deeply struck by this time to be torn up without a wrench altogether disproportionate to the occasion.

As she had herself said to Iva, any change of manner on her own part would be provocative of an outcry on that of all the rest; even Maud and the younger ones would have stared and looked at each other; yet to have the usual easy intimacy continue unabated would certainly seem like courting peril.

On the other hand was Iva's "We can't have this sort of thing now!" Iva was safe so far, when she could say that. Her tongue

would have been tied had there been any secret misgivings, any lurking consciousness ; for Iva was a truthful girl, and would have scorned by dissimulation to throw her mother off the scent.

Still, that was no criterion for the future. "Didn't I say to my own foolish heart over and over again that I cared no more for Jack Kildare than the post by the garden gate, and didn't I just jump at him the moment he said the word?" reflected the widow, with a smile and a sigh ; "and didn't I think Sir Thomas Tilbury a mighty fine man, and Tilbury Court a beautiful place, and wasn't it all I could do to bring myself to say 'Yes' when *he* proposed? How is a poor girl to know what she will feel like when the time comes? Maybe, just the very other way to what she felt before!" cogitated she, smiling and murmuring, as the profundity of her wisdom set her up in her own eyes. "Oh, they're queer things, the boys! A boy may talk and talk, and pay you fine compliments, spend his breath and his money upon you ; and another just gives a lift of his eye ——" Then Lady Tilbury paused, and the Irish girl stiffened into the baronet's lady and county dowager. "It would be a wretched marriage for Iva. Sir Thomas always told me that Iva ought to marry well, and predicted that a single season in town would be all that

she required. She had her season, and made nothing of it. She went everywhere, and was seen everywhere. She looked her best. But what was her 'best' was other girls' 'best' as well. Florence, Ethel, Evelyn," running over in her mind a list of *débutantes*, "their mothers thought the same of them as I did of Iva. Oh, I'm not a fool!" (Lady Tilbury was right. She was by no means a fool.) "Sure enough, *I* think no one can touch my Iva—my pretty Iva—with the blue mist in her eyes and the red paint on her lips; but though she is there before them, and they need to be stone-blind not to see the difference, they don't see it. Say they to me—to me—Iva's mother, 'Have you heard how immensely dear Florrie was admired at the Embassy ball?'"—mimicking—"or, 'I suppose I ought not to refuse that invitation of the Duke's for darling Ethel. They make such a point of her going. They say the whole party is got up for her.' I'm very fond of Lady Christopher Bell—I am indeed; but when she goes raving on about that affected, airified daughter of hers, gazing at her as if she were a goddess, and whispering where she gets her dresses, as if we were all just dying to hear, I do feel inclined to say: 'Sure, we don't care if Evelyn pulls her clothes out of the rag-bag!' They don't catch me

thrusting Iva down their throats. Her mother isn't going to be her trumpeter. I just sat still as a mouse, thinking to myself: 'Silly sheep! I see through you all.' It's something for a girl to have a clever mother like me. But I couldn't make 'Iva *go*, cleverness and all," reflected Lady Tilbury, her complacency dying out. "Anyhow, she didn't go off. To be sure, we made fun of some of them that might have come after her; there was that fat Jemmy Tong—but I never could abide a fat man, no more can Iva; and then there was the red-headed Vernon; Vernon's a good name, and he was a good-natured, decent creature—but red hair, and freckles, and a mouth that met at the back! Iva is like myself; we do fairly *turn* at ugly men. Well, now, Reggie Goffe is not particularly good-looking," continued the lady, turning to more practical reflections. "I wonder if I'm not making a mountain out of Reggie. A mole-hill he may not exactly be, but there are degrees. I shall just have to take care," she concluded, as she had begun.

This reverie took place on the afternoon of the day when the young gentleman brought up his broken finger-nail to be nursed. He had appeared at noon, stayed luncheon, and hung about the doors till three o'clock, when he had formed a fishing party, and swept off

the whole four girls and the governess to the river.

Of course, they caught nothing ; it was very seldom they ever did catch anything ; but it was useless to try and stop their going. Useless, that is to say, from the wisdom point. Lady Tilbury could have pronounced an arbitrary "I won't have it!" She would have done so promptly enough on another occasion, but she knew better than to risk the "Why not?" which would have burst from all alike, had she ventured on the prohibition now.

Iva had said that her mother was to be "formal and serious," which was all very fine. What good would formality and seriousness do if shared by nobody? Iva herself was in a gay, ironical mood, not at all adapted to check the spirits of the rest ; while the younger sisters, instead of eating their dinners phlegmatically, as was their wont—the while they kept their ears open for any scraps of information over which to gloat in private—were all on the giggle. Lady Tilbury, who, with all her partiality for her first-born, was still the mother of them all, looked from one to another benignantly, and could not find it in her heart to restrain the mirth so seldom evinced. "They are all stupid. They are not like Iva and me," she would say to herself. "Poor things! it

is not their fault; Sir Thomas's daughters—although Sir Thomas was a fine man—but still, how can they be anything else?" And if one of the three by a mere chance was smart or shrewd, the saying was applauded, and the speaker patted on the shoulder, with an amount of approval never accorded to Iva.

"Pooh! You can't help having an Irish tongue in your head!"

Iva had once taken her mother to task for commending a small jest of Maud's as though it were a fine original aphorism, and Lady Tilbury had tossed her head, and retorted as above.

What was instinctive in a Kildare was creditable and to be encouraged in a Tilbury. "Sir Thomas, poor man, never knew when I was laughing and when not," cried she. "I can see his face; Iva, you know how he used to look—so puzzled and bewildered; and then he would say in his slow, solemn way: 'Of course, if you are *joking*—but why did you not tell me you were joking?' As if one needed to tell! It is the English way, my dear; I soon grew accustomed to it, and liked Sir Thomas none the less. Indeed, he was a very fine man; Iva, always remember that your stepfather was a fine, generous, high-minded gentleman—ah, but he was different

from my poor Jack, who, if he had lived—he wasn't as good a man as Sir Thomas, Iva —,”

Here Iva would break in with a stormy remonstrance, which would sometimes be listened to, sometimes not.

Either way, her mother would adhere obstinately to what she had said, for, albeit the girl's passionate partisanship for the father whom her infantile eyes alone had beheld was music in her ears, recollection was too keen, and frankness of disposition too ineradicable.

In moments of confidence, truth would out. “He was just a wild scamp, that's what he was! Indeed, 'twas well he was taken.” Lady Tilbury would wipe her eyes and shake her head. “He would have broken my heart if he had lived, Iva, my darling;” and by that time, having heard all she had heard, and hung her head for shame during the recital, Iva would listen in silence; and, the past being very real and vivid before her when thus depicted, would wonder a little to see her mother as merry and cheerful as ever an hour afterwards.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE IRISHWOMAN."

"THERE go those Irishwomen and their adorer!" exclaimed Miss Sophia Lossett, one autumn afternoon shortly after this.

The light was waning, but Miss Sophy's eyes were sharp, and she had time ere Lady Tilbury's open landau rolled past over the cobbles, to see that it contained not only her ladyship and her eldest daughter, but Reginald Goffe, the latter leaning forward comfortably to address them from the front seat.

"One would think that, having done so well for herself, my lady would know better than to have that poor penniless Reggie hanging on to Iva," continued the spinster, gazing after the carriage, while addressing herself to some one within. "He is never away from them; and of course he can't go there as he does without being encouraged. It's not as if there were any man or boy at Tilbury Court for him to go about with; he must be with the girls the whole

time ; and Lady Tilbury will only have herself to thank if anything comes of it."

"I don't suppose Lady Tilbury will ask your advice in the management of her affairs." Major-General Lossett, V.C., who was seated napping in his arm-chair by the fire, and who had received his daughter's opening comments with a solitary grunt, here so far woke up to the occasion as to make a testy response. He had no greater affection for Lady Tilbury than Sophia had. Shall we tell our readers why?

On Sir Thomas Tilbury's demise, three years before, the old general, who had taken up his abode in the village—in one of the respectable dwelling-houses embowered in shrubs of which previous mention has been made—was observed to hold his head higher and step out more briskly than was his wont. New suits came down for him from London, and certain threats of growing a beard to save the trouble of shaving, which had for some time off and on distracted Miss Sophy (who had a horror of beards), were heard of no more.

Sophy may have guessed what this meant, or she may not. Probably she had her suspicions; but if so, like a dutiful daughter, she kept them to herself, being tolerably sure that she need not trouble her head as to anything coming of it all.

"Does he think I'd take *him* for a third?" could not have been ejaculated with greater vehemence by Lady Tilbury herself than it was in effect by the general's middle-aged daughter, who was also, truth to tell, Lady Tilbury's contemporary and rival.

For Sophy had her own grudge against the mistress of Tilbury Court, and calling her "the Irishwoman," as Marie Antoinette was derisively styled "the Austrian," relieved her spleen on her own account, as well as on her father's.

Miss Lossett would fain have been Sir Thomas's wife; the general had sought to succeed Sir Thomas as Lady Tilbury's husband.

On first becoming inhabitants of the village of Little Cary, far from the haunts of men—as haunts go in these days—the two were younger by sixteen years than they were on this, our first introduction to them. The general, just retired from the army, spruce, upright, energetic, was, in his own opinion, an addition to any neighbourhood, and equal to "making his market" in any society.

His daughter, to be sure, was an encumbrance; but Sophy was a good-looking lass still under thirty; an eligible widower or mature bachelor might be found for her; and in pitching upon the Gate House, Little Cary, as a

good camping ground, it is probable the wily soldier took into account the proximity of Tilbury Park, with its free and unclaimed owner.

Here was the very man for Sophy ! A man of sixty, and a confirmed bachelor—but with no occasion for being so. A stalwart, ruddy-faced country gentleman, who in all probability hated fine ladies and fashionable persecution ; who, it was understood, seldom quitted his own neighbourhood, but had no dislike to social intercourse if carried on within its limits. Sophy would have every chance ; and Sophy thought so too.

It did seem a piece of the cruellest ill-luck that the gentleman in question, having remained quiescent throughout previous long years of bachelorhood, should within six months of the Gate House being inhabited, bring over from the Sister Isle a bright-eyed dame, with a free tread and youthful bloom, though accompanied by a little maid, three years of age, a saucy, babyish edition of herself.

Everybody took kindly to the bride, moreover. She was called upon by the principal ladies of the neighbourhood, and speedily took her place among them. The duchess, in spite of living a dozen miles off, had found her way over to Tilbury Court after meeting the Til-

burys at dinner, and laughing till she cried over Irish stories told with Irish spirit and vivacity. Sir Thomas had been deeply gratified by the attention, and by finding that the same ready speech and joyous laugh which had tickled his own ears, had power to charm others.

Secretly, he had been a little nervous about the new Lady Tilbury's success in county society. All the sayings anent foolish marriages and doting elderly husbands which had ever come to his ken marshalled themselves in array before him now; and, aware that he had recklessly let himself go, and succumbed to the pretty widow's charms without a struggle, he told himself stoutly that he must now be prepared to stand by her, should the worst come to the worst.

At any rate, he took comfort in the reflection that no one could deny his Molly's looks, nor her native grace and elegance. She would outshine her sex one and all, as far as these were concerned; but if they took to looking down upon her on other grounds, turning up their dashed noses, because she was (with a gulp) a nobody who came from nowhere—confound the impudence of women! this was just what they were sure to do!—*he* would glare them down, and see them far enough before

one of them should set foot in Tilbury Court! Three neckties did Sir Thomas ruin and fling away as he pursued his fierce ruminations on the occasion of the first county dinner.

But that dinner sounded the bugle note of recall.

He recanted every word he had uttered against the wives and daughters of his good friends and neighbours. They were a very decent set of old girls; he never wished to live among a better. They had taken Molly by the hand, and—and actually made a fuss about her! He had seen his bride not merely put forward and seated in a place of honour—that was inevitable—but honestly and genuinely the centre of attraction. One and another had murmured flattering asides in his delighted ear.

And Molly herself seemed quite at ease, chatting away on the big central ottoman, beneath a blaze of overhanging light, which made her look dazzlingly fresh and fair, so that her proud proprietor could scarce keep his own eyes properly turned in other directions. He saw that the seats on either side of Lady Tilbury were never vacant; that men stood in front of her; and when she sang, as she did presently, a wild, sweet ditty of her native land, and when at its close there was a deep-drawn breath

from all, followed by a burst of applause and gratitude, Sir Thomas's triumph was complete.

It was complete so far as it went ; but even such a triumph was capable of extension, as was evident within a brief space.

An invitation came from the dean and the dean's wife, and this having been accepted, and the evening having arrived, Lady Tilbury, with an idea of suiting herself to her company, donned the most sober costume in her wardrobe, and then, fearing she had gone too far, relieved it by putting on the whole of her diamonds.

The result was simply enchanting ; she had never looked better in her life.

And unconsciously she followed up the idea when it came to talking time. As she was in a clerical house, and dignitaries of Church and State were present—including the duke and a ducal party—Molly of Athlone, who had never been in company of the kind before (though no one would have guessed as much, and only Sir Thomas knew it for a fact), sat demure and graceful throughout the early part of the evening, speaking only when spoken to, and keeping her dancing eyes upon the table-cloth when the fun of others induced her almost irresistibly to take part in it—and then all at once, as she had bejewelled herself because too plainly

garbed before her mirror, so did she flash out into witty sayings and rippling laughter so soon as it seemed she was overdoing her part of mute auditor in a gay general conversation.

After this it was that the ladies in the drawing-room had such a treat as the dean's dinner-parties rarely afforded.

And it was on the same occasion that the animated "Your wife has charmed us all, Sir Thomas. May I be allowed to drive over to Tilbury Court and improve our acquaintance?" of the duchess, as she shook Sir Thomas by the hand on departure, stamped Sir Thomas's choice as a success for all time.

Nor had the good impression once created ever been suffered to die out. Lady Tilbury was a person to disarm the foul fiend himself—unless under special conditions. These conditions only attaching to two people—so far, at least, as come within the limits of these pages—all the other inhabitants of the district were on the best of terms with the frank and blithe young madam.

They did not resent her cleverness, for they did not know she was clever. She did not talk intellectually, nor even always sensibly. She simply "ran on" and made them laugh.

And the laughter was often led against herself. Her blunders, her mishaps, the unlucky

days she had when everything went wrong, and the comical figure she cut in her misery would be depicted so graphically and with such absence of any *amour propre* that no one could resist the fascination.

"Is she not rather a silly person?" the very profound and prosaic dean's wife did once or twice adventure when well away from her friend the duchess. "I should never say so at Heath Castle, for Lady Tilbury is such a favourite there; but I do sometimes feel that the mother of all those children ——"

No one else, however, seemed to think that the children had anything to do with it. They came in rapid succession, Maud, Mabel, and Marianne—it was Sir Thomas's whim to confine them to one initial letter—and still Lady Tilbury looked as young as ever, was as sprightly as ever; but her character was unimpeachable, and her life irreproachable.

She even advanced in public favour, as it was seen that she accommodated herself to the traditions of the neighbourhood, and adopted its manners and customs—in short, naturalised herself as completely as though she had gone through the ceremony at a consul's office. Nothing was further from her purpose than to fly her own flag and sail away from the old-established fleet. On the contrary, she was

anxiously careful to manifest on every possible occasion her desire to do as others did, and, as Sir Thomas Tilbury's wife, to be catalogued with all the other wives of her own standing in the county, joining in their schemes, assisting in their charities, participating in their businesses and pleasures.

Sir Thomas's purse was at her command, and it was well filled—fuller than that of any landowner around—but Lady Tilbury knew better than to oppress the neighbourhood with lavishness. She never made a mistake in giving too large a donation, nor in proposing amalgamations on too expensive a scale. "There was a time when a shilling was a shilling to me," she was wont to remind herself—and Sophy Lossett owed more than she ever suspected to that reflection.

All the same, Sophy could not forgive her supplanter—not even when the reverend lady at the Deanery came to own that light-heartedness and levity were different things, and that if Lady Tilbury had "not much mind," she had at any rate "a kind heart".

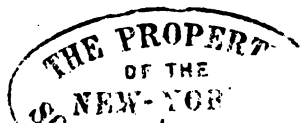
Lady Tilbury, it may just be mentioned, chanced after a time to have it in her power to render Mrs. Chancellor a service, what she herself deemed only a trifling service, but which struck a tender, tremulous chord in the stern

matron's soul—(for it affected a son who ought to have been prodigal, but was not)—so that the poor woman, who might otherwise have been a formidable critic, was disabled, being the prey of a deep-seated reticent gratitude, which acted in future like a drag on the wheel if ever Lady Tilbury's name were set a-rolling in her presence, and loosened tongues might otherwise have sought to belittle her.

A set face with stiffened lips, or a few pungent words, would soon let those beneath the Deanery influence know what they were to think of Sir Thomas Tilbury's wife.

Within the seclusion of her boudoir, Mrs. Chancellor would be still more explicit. "My dear Caroline"—she had a sister named Caroline, and Caroline acted as her mouthpiece towards outlying acquaintances—"my dear Caroline, Lady Tilbury is not a person of any cultivation ; her abilities are not by any means first-rate. Besides which there can be no doubt that her manners are flighty—decidedly flighty. But she has a kind heart, Caroline, a kind heart, as—ahem!—I have occasion to know."

It was not necessary for Caroline to be informed as to the "occasion," for, of course, Caroline was perfectly aware to what her poor dear sister referred.



“Lady Tilbury has a kind heart,” the dean’s wife would proceed with emphasis—warmly too, for her; “and, my dear, what is more to be desired in man or woman than a kind heart?”

People whose hearts were not exactly kind were apt to take off Mrs. Chancellor when thus delivering herself of a platitude. Quip, the organist, could do it to the life. She was called pompous, and sententious; but few persons realise how difficult it is for a dean’s wife not to be pompous and sententious. Even Mr. Dean himself permitted his opinions to be stolen, re-hatched, and presented to him again as new and original.

So then it was laid down by deaconal law that Lady Tilbury had a kind heart; and as it had taken four or five years for the discovery to be made, it was valued in proportion; it put the coping stone on the favour which its unconscious object had been building up for herself in the interim.

Whatever else Lady Tilbury might or might not be, she had a kind heart, for the dean’s wife had said so; and then another voice gave tongue to the same tune—that of a man not addicted to caring for things pure, lovely, and of good report. “Lady Tilbury? She’s a pretty woman, an’ a good woman; an’ Til-

bury's a deuced lucky fellow!" growled Puddington, the ill-mannered, savage M.F.H., whose wife was always on the sofa, and a thorn in his flesh on other grounds besides, as all the world knew. "Men who wait to get married till they are well away in their second half-century can afford to pick a rosebud without thorns," uttered he, thinking of his prickly home.

But his harsh, strident tones would insensibly soften when addressing his friend's wife; and those who knew the man would find it almost pathetic to see how he watched with the tail of his eye Sir Thomas's big bulky form hovering about the wagonette wherein sat his radiant young wife in the midst of her flock, all turned out spick and span for the meet.

Iva would be on her pony, keeping fast by her step-father's side, panting for the run to begin; and Sir Thomas would be every whit as proud of her as if she had been one of his own.

Poor Puddington, who had an empty nursery, and was not even allowed to be jolly with associates of his own sort because of crabbed, lynx-eyed jealousy, would mark Sir Thomas strut and crow over his brood like the worthy old gamecock he was—and himself scuffle off after the hounds with something like an oath at his heart.

After his own fashion, Puddington would have been a domestic man; but early wedlock in search of gold had barred fast the way. His one possibly unconscious wish now was that it might at last open clear before him, clear as Sir Thomas's had done, and that he also might find a—Lady Tilbury.

But when Sir Thomas died, Mr. Puddington was still shackled as fast as he had ever been, and Major-General Lossett, V.C., had no need to dread him as a rival. Puddington was not among those who marched smiling up to the widow's door, and slunk frowning away.

And he still swore by Lady Tilbury—instead of swearing at her. In consequence, the general called him a "jackass," and Miss Sophy thought him scarce worth waiting for; since even if the invalid wife were to drop off at last, and make a final exit from her couch and her medicine bottles, it was more than likely that the emancipated M.F.H. would turn his eyes straight towards Tilbury Court, undeterred by the bones of the victims gone that way before him.

He was known to entertain a feeling that was almost respect for Lady Tilbury, and respect from a man like Puddington, meant a great deal. "He'd be after her like a shot, if that wife of his would die," said Lossett.

CHAPTER IX.

"WHAT DO YOU WISH ME TO DO, IVA?"

"COME in, come in; make haste and get warm!" cried Lady Tilbury, bustling forward through her large saloon, dim and shadowy at that hour, to where a glorious fire shed its blaze on the cheerful tea-table, bespread with good things. "Such a mercy those men have come and gone, and we can begin to be cosy at once!" continued she, throwing off hat and gloves, and kneeling down upon the fender-stool to warm her hands.

Early training was still at times too much for her ladyship, and she could not regard her butlers and footmen quite as the automatons her Tilbury daughters did.

Maud and her younger sisters never gave these a thought; even Iva, accustomed to them from early youth, scarce noticed them more; but Iva's mother would now and again grow restless beneath the solemnity of Tilbury Court ceremonial.

On the whole she liked it; deprived of it,

she would have felt its loss; but in certain moods Irish Molly threw off twenty years of her life, and with these all the wealth, grandeur, and comfort which they had brought. Before her first marriage Molly had been very poor indeed. Then had come comparative ease; finally affluence. She could not now have done without the affluence, but poverty had left a faint, almost undistinguishable stamp, which yet could never be wholly obliterated.

Iva, with her mother's gesture, unconsciously caught—a free and graceful gesture it was—now also tossed aside her outdoor equipment, and spread her smaller fingers in the grateful warmth, with so exact a reproduction of Lady Tilbury's air and attitude that the latter gave her a little push.

“Ah, get along with you, mother's own child!” cried she, in richest Hibernian accents. “The cow and the calf, isn't it, Reggie? Here, Reggie, come and warm yourself too,” making room for him between them.

Iva gave her mother a look; “Formal and serious,” it said.

“Oh, bother formality and seriousness!” mentally ejaculated the widow, who had been struggling with those demons the whole afternoon. “Am I never to speak to the poor boy in my own natural voice again? Besides, it's

not me, it's Iva who ought to take care. What can poor me matter?" And she smiled round on the tall figure which slid into the proffered niche, nothing loth, and apparently quite undeterred by any absence of encouragement from the figure on the other side.

Iva rose and walked to the tea-table.

"Iva thinks 'Two's company, three's none,'" quoth Lady Tilbury, laughing. "Move off a little, Reggie; there's plenty of room now. We two can warm ourselves without jostling each other," and she gave his elbow a little friendly push.

A large log, all alight, fell off the fire, and necessitated a sudden dart back of both. "Come, sir, pick that up," said Lady Tilbury authoritatively; but Iva had risen and rung the bell as her mother spoke. "The servants had better put the fire together again properly," said she.

It was the same throughout the meal. Lady Tilbury had been exhilarated by her drive on a pleasant afternoon in pleasant company; she had been well received at various houses, and found abundance of food for chatter on leaving each of them; and though latterly somewhat chilled by the autumnal atmosphere as daylight faded, the chilling had not been mental, and she could not understand Iva's sudden turn.

"She was lively enough all the first part of the drive, though she did give me *looks*," reflected she; "what have I done, or what has poor Reggie done, to be frozen now?"

What had Reggie done? Reggie himself knew very well; but it was not his part to enlighten any one; in consequence, he did not even affect a humble, contrite air which might have roused suspicion.

On the contrary he was particularly cheerful and disengaged. Our hostess sipped her tea, munched her toast, and thought with her usual easy indulgence that Iva was a silly girl, but that the present development of silliness might be turned to account, being, perhaps, all things considered, not a bad ending to a somewhat jovial afternoon, throughout which—at least, during the greater part of which—all three had made merry to their hearts' content; while all the time Iva sat raging at the other side of the festal board, every morsel she ate choking in her throat. "She really is too absurd!" concluded Iva's mother, half-amused, half-vexed, as the hour passed.

"Mr. Stokes, my lady, would like to see you, if convenient." As things stood, my lady considered she might safely leave the room to see Mr. Stokes, or anybody else; wherefore without hesitation, remembering also that she had

on her own account something she wished to see Mr. Stokes about, she repaired to the business-room—Sir Thomas's business-room, still used as such—where the steward awaited her.

A bent head was raised and a drooping eyelid lifted as the rustle of her skirts ceased, and the great door by which she had departed slid into its socket again.

There was a moment's silence, then : "What do you wish me to do, Iva?" said a voice, the voice Iva was waiting for.

"Do?" She was on her feet as he spoke. "Do?" The light of battle blazed in her eyes. "Do?" she cried for the third time. "You have done enough, I think! Do? There's nothing left to be done, I should say! Do?" Her breath came and went in scornful gasps. "*Do?*"

"I'm awfully sorry, Iva."

"Sorry! You ought to be. I never was so—how *could* you? And you had no right—if my mother only knew!—I can't speak of it ——"

"My hands were so beastly cold; and that beastly pocket-book of mine ——"

"What have I to do with your pocket-book? What would your cold hands have mattered if—if ——?"

"If I had remembered it was in it, I should never ——"

"The idea of carrying about my—my ——"

"You gave it me yourself."

"Gave it you! Yes—as we all did. For your collection. Everybody gives photographs. You said you collected. I don't suppose you do ——"

"I do—really. I have got several of you in it."

"And you pretended you had not one!"

"Not this time. Not since I came back. The last I had was an old one, taken ——"

"Oh, what does it matter? You got this out of me, and—and—I *am* so ashamed! It is too bad!" Tears stood in her eyes.

There was a pause.

"If your mother had not asked me to leave my cards upon the Deanery table, it would never have happened," recommenced he at last, as though an extenuating circumstance had occurred to his memory. "I was fumbling with my cards, and the beastly thing ——"

"Yes—the beastly thing—my photograph!"

"No, no—the pocket-book. It is such a brute of a pocket-book. If you look here, I'll show you," feeling in his breast-pocket, "I can show you exactly how I did it."

"Do you think I care how you did it? Anybody could see how the thing was done. No one supposes you meant to disgrace me."

"Iva!"

"It did disgrace me. You may say what you will; it *disgraced* me!" Her bosom heaved, and again the moisture suffused her eyes.

He opened his mouth to speak, and shut it again.

"If only no one had seen!" broke forth Iva at last, with a new flash of indignation. "You had no right to have it—no business to have it—in *that* way; but I could have taken it back, and said no more about it; only I should never have given you another, and I never, *never* will now." ("Humph! I'll stick to this then!" mentally resolved he.) "But that girl who picked it up, she must have seen, and of course by this time she has told all the rest," proceeded Iva bitterly. "It was Esther, and I saw her give it a good look, as she held it in her hand; and she smiled—I am sure she smiled—and glanced at me. Reggie, how could you do it? How *could* you do it?" With the words the speaker's voice broke, and he perceived that the end had come.

CHAPTER X.

THE AWAKENING.

WITHOUT a word he rose and went out.

He walked soberly enough along the corridor, through the hall and down the front door steps, and drew a breath of relief as he passed into the silent world beyond. He had not met Lady Tilbury, nor any one; and the friendly darkness without now swallowed him up. That was something; he could look and feel as he chose.

The puzzle was that he felt so odd.

And he had only had a quarrel with Iva—one of many—and he had never minded a quarrel before. Iva, who knew him well—rather, who read him like a book—had spoken no less than the truth when she told her mother that there was nothing Reggie Goffe liked better than to have some one (presumably of the fair sex) in a huff with him; and the speaker might have added that if that some one were herself it added a special grain of zest to the sport.

She had a suspicion that it was so, and that she and Reggie would go on all their lives keeping up this mimic warfare, if she did not in her own person decline the part allotted to her.

She had declined it; had meant to do so, at least. To her eyes it was undignified, unworthy of her advancing years and maidenhood, to carry on this species of flirtation—for it was nothing else—with her former playmate. It was likely to make people talk; and as there neither was nor ever could be anything to talk about, she had the sense to see that the time had come to make a stand.

In consequence, our young lady's manner had undergone a change, subtle but steadfast; and by dint of continued watching and reminding she had kept her mother tolerably well up to the mark likewise. "Treat him as if he were a silly boy; as if he were privileged to be absurd; and do not be drawn into taking offence at *anything*," would this youthful Solomon exhort; and the recipient of such wisdom, in terror of a frown, had learnt to seek her daughter's eyes ere making a proposition or responding to an overture.

Reggie had tried being aggrieved, but to no purpose. Lady Tilbury had hastened to explain away all that could offend, and efface its

recollection with kindest words and smiles. Iva herself, with a frank, innocent countenance that seemed to see nothing amiss, would lay herself out to be pleasant on such occasions. He was gently propelled off the quicksand by two pairs of fair feminine arms.

So that he might have been supposed to lick his lips, vulgarly speaking, over the present breakdown. He had caught his will-o'-the-wisp for once. She had not only suffered herself to be angry, but her resentment had been kept under lock and key until every other presence was withdrawn, and he and she could have it out alone together—a heavenly state of things.

To have brought it about, moreover, through the agency of a genuine piece of carelessness ought to have been the crowning point of his self-gratulation—and yet what had become of the self-gratulation?

It was quite certain that his bosom contained none.

After a few minutes' hurried walking, during which a ridiculous fear lest his footsteps might be arrested by a call from behind, made him cover the ground as rapidly as possible, he slackened his pace, grasped the stick in his hand less tightly, and relaxed the tension of his muscles. He had got breathing space; now he could think.

The first thing to think over was the scene at the Deanery, whence dated all the present convulsion of the elements.

Of course, he had never meant Iva to know that he carried about her photograph in his pocket; he did not himself know why he carried it; he thought it a good likeness, the best Iva had had taken; he thought he would go to the same place himself to be done; he thought vignettes of faces came out better than full-length figures.

One day after looking at it for a while on the mantelpiece of his little room (where the various members of the Tilbury family were the admiration of the small farm-servant who dusted them), he stuffed it into his pocket-book under a momentary impulse; and it had remained there.

But it was doing no harm; not only did nobody know, but he himself often forgot the circumstance; and as he carried a multifarious collection of articles in the same well-worn receptacle—letters, addresses, and the like—it really seemed a very trifling matter that tumbling about among them all should be the clear-cut profile with the beautiful chin and the soft upturned eye, of Iva Kildare.

To return to the Deanery hall, and the fatal moment.

The party were engaged in leave-taking after a genial and prolonged call—"quite a visitation," according to Lady Tilbury; and the dean's wife—by this time always more than civil beneath the remembrance of the distant un-prodigious son—had followed her visitors to the door, her hand within Lady Tilbury's arm.

The two were talking as though they had left everything to the last moment to say, as is the way of womankind; and Iva also, with the three daughters of the house surging around her, had become entangled in a wild fantasia of arrangements, promises, and "Don't forgets"; so that there was a general hubbub, and Reggie himself, quite at ease with the dean—to whom he usually gave a wide berth as a formidable unknown quantity, but who seemed only jolly and chatty, when thus hedged in by family influence—was happily unaware of the pitfall yawning in front of him.

Lady Tilbury having no longer Sir Thomas's cards to lay on the table, as she made her way carriage-wards, was suddenly inspired—or so it now seemed in the retrospection—by the demon of maladroitness to admonish her young companion in an audible aside, "Your cards, Reggie," and as he could not well correct her ladyship by pointing out that there was no one on whom cards could be left, seeing that the

entire family had been found at home, he did as he was desired without a word.

Had Lady Tilbury not been Lady Tilbury, he would have turned to jest the exhortation. With her, however, there would have been no jest about it. She would have been put to the blush, covered with confusion ; she was always sensitive to slips, consequent on not having been early and properly drilled in such trivialities ;—but little did she guess how much the mute obedience of her young friend was to cost him !

Fumbling between his gloves and his pocket-book—he told Iva his hands were cold, but they were not ; it was the gentleman's memory which was at fault—still, he had to hold thick dogskin gloves, and a hat, and a stick, and to pick out from the miscellaneous contents of the bulky leather case (it was his only storehouse) the small pieces of pasteboard which seemed to be nowhere directly they were wanted—routing about, as we say, under such conditions, nothing was simpler than for some of the other items within the case to fall out.

And of course it was the one thing that really mattered which fell.

It always is. We may have a dozen articles about us, whose exposure would not affect ourselves or any one else in the slightest degree,

but it is the one little trifle we never mention, the one little weakness we are shy about, that is sure to turn traitor at a crucial moment.

Out slithered, slipping this way and that, and finally, as he made an ineffectual dart after it, flying far off along the polished floor, the photograph of Iva, which had reposed dormant within its snug retreat for a space of several weeks.

Iva, with the dean's daughters, chanced, as luck would have it, to be in the very part of the hall to which the fugitive flew. Two of her companions had their heads turned the other way; the hall was dim, and there was a general bustle; it might be taken for granted that they saw nothing. But one, a nimble girl, to whose very feet the photograph came, picked it up ere the owner could do so, and restored it to him, Iva standing by. One look at Iva's face told Reggie what had been done.

To the young man's credit, however, be it recorded that no one—not even Iva herself—could charge him with making bad worse. Beneath the awful moment he bore himself bravely—receiving back his property, thanking for it, continuing to rummage within the pocket-book, and finally discovering that not a single visiting-card did it contain (cruellest cut of all),—through it all, and throughout

the homeward drive and the hour which followed, while Lady Tilbury prattled, and the silver tea-table tinkled, no one would ever have dreamt that anything had happened—still less that the unfortunate young man was waiting for an explanation to take place, the bare thought of which made his nerves tingle.

And now the interview was over, and the reality had not exceeded his anticipations; but neither had it fallen short of them. He wondered dully whether he had supposed Iva would be as bad as she had been, as vehement, bitter, and unyielding—or whether he had not hoped by penitence and promises to disarm her.

He thought he had so hoped, but he was not clear. Nothing was clear; he was dazed, like a dumb beast beneath a shower of blows.

And he walked from side to side along the road, though there was a young moon, which had now got up with a faint partial ray, by which he could have seen perfectly to hold straight on.

After all, what was there to mind? He kicked a stone from his path sullenly. It was all nonsense; another kick. It was a bore; a confounded bore. What on earth—women were always—there was no peace with them.

Then he tried to whistle. Dash it! why shouldn't he whistle? He had got away from the house, and not a soul within hearing. What was he walking so fast for? To get home? He didn't want to get home.

On a sudden he came to a dead stop. The park gates were in front of him.

By the roadside was a fallen tree, which had been uprooted during a recent gale, and he found himself sitting upon it presently. Supposing, now, that he were some other fellow, how would that other fellow feel? Supposing that he had some one to talk the whole affair over with, what would the other be saying?

If it were Tommy Cheveley, for instance? Tommy would begin: "I say, old chap, what's up? Blues seem pretty bad, eh?"

He would, of course, reply by denying that anything was "up," that "blues" existed. Tommy would persist. He would still deny, but more feebly.

Then there would be a silence; Tommy smoking, himself knocking his stick about.

Then he would burst out; he would tell the whole story; he would call himself an ass—a bally idiot—all the usual terms of opprobrium; Tommy would roar with laughter, and say—yes, of course Tommy would say—Tommy was such a thundering fool he would be sure to say

—men like Tommy would never think of anything else to say than that he was—
was —

Rot! Utter rot! No one but a fool like Cheveley would ever be so—as to think it was *that*. Why, dash it all! he hadn't a sixpence, and no more had she.

Besides, Iva wasn't at all the sort of girl for a poor man. And even if—if he were so besotted as to go and let himself in for anything of *that* kind, it would be no good. She would as soon think of the man in the moon as of him.

What had induced him to lug about that thing in his pocket? If only he had left it with the rest on his mantelpiece, or in a drawer, the whole nuisance would never have occurred.

Nuisance? It was worse than a nuisance—it was checkmate. He had gone and *done* for himself; knocked on the head all the jolly, pleasant old times, all the coming and going, and easy meetings, and adoption into the family circle at Tilbury Court, which had from time immemorial been associated with a stay at Old Cary Farm.

Even when at school, if given his choice as to whether he would join his uncle abroad or betake himself to the farm (the only alternative which presented itself for the homeless boy), he

had jumped at the latter proposition, and passed the holidays blithely.

Later on, when other relations had extended the finger of hospitality as the good-looking, presentable youth began to be somewhat of an addition to house parties and festal gatherings, he had not been quite so constant to his first love, but still he had paid occasional visits ; and those visits had always been understood to include shooting over Sir Thomas Tilbury's preserves, and frolicking with his daughters.

Sir Thomas, who had felt a sincere pity for the misfortunes of a brother proprietor, was glad to do the civil, as he called it, towards Sir Philip's nephew, a nice lad, whose birth was as good as his own, but who would have to knock about the world for a living all his days, whether he ever came in for the Old Cary estate or not. It would never keep him—or at least he would never be able to live at it—any more than his uncle. The rent-roll was down to nothing ; and what Mr. Minching and the rest of the Stock Exchange gentlemen paid for the shootings was just about enough to enable Sir Philip to live. Live decently he could not, according to Sir Thomas's ideas.

The latter was therefore compassionately disposed towards poor Sir Philip's nephew, with the easy compassion of the prosperous.

Whenever he heard that Reggie was about, this compassion would take shape in the form he himself would best have appreciated ; and it had found a not ungrateful recipient. There had been days of tramping the stubble, followed by cosy dinners in the lesser dining-room at Tilbury Court, when the slim lad had been all alone and quite at home with the two kindly elders, the stolid, benignant, steady-eating Sir Thomas, and the merry, lively, pretty Lady Tilbury.

He had been proud of his position as guest, enjoying Iva's envy and rueful look on saying "Good-night" before the other three went in to dinner. He was seven years Iva's senior, and though she tried to be on terms of strict equality at other times—even to look down on him as "only a boy, who thought he was a man because he had a gun"—there was no getting over the distinction drawn at dinner-time.

Lady Tilbury was not going to give in on this point. She had one or two very clear ideas in her head, and she drew the line with a firm hand when she did draw it. Iva's fine eyes and complexion were not to be ruined by late hours or ever the world had a chance of seeing them.

To Iva herself, her mother only seemed to have a tiresome "kink" upon the subject.

Without saying why, she was a hard-hearted woman every night when eight o'clock arrived.

All of this, and much more of the same, now floated in confused phantasmagoria before the troubled gaze of a motionless figure seated on a fallen tree in the moonlight.

If—just supposing—if—it were the case—that he had—had any sort of reason for having played the fool with that thing in his pocket-book, what kind of return was this for all those years of kindness and free intimacy?

Was it not because such an outcome of them was wholly and absolutely beyond his reach that it had never been taken into consideration? He had been accredited with good sense and good feeling; and looking back, he now knew that he had once possessed both.

What had become of them?

Once or twice of recent years, especially when the increasing beauty of Iva Kildare had been the theme of the neighbourhood, he had been amused to see the side looks cast at him, and to gather that Iva's mother was held to be an imprudent parent from the matrimonial point of view.

Conscious that his heart was whole, and proud of the trust reposed in him, he had enjoyed the hints of the gossips. They would soon be put a stop to, and that in the most natural and

common-place manner. Iva would make a great marriage, and he would act as verger—the modern rendering for dance a jig—at her wedding. Wherever his regiment might be, he would apply for leave to be present on the interesting occasion.

“Then, I suppose, I should have to turn off Maud?” he was wont to cogitate, puffing a cigar at his ease. “Fat Maud won’t flit as easily as Iva, but she has a gilt backing; she’ll go some time or other. Perhaps I shall have peace by then,” he would sigh plaintively to himself. It was a pity he could never vent this burden of his soul, it would have been such a fruitful grievance.

But—now—now—now, what about now? Letting one’s thoughts drift and range over the past is easy, and in its absence of all effort dulls the poignancy of the present; but dreaming, recalling, cursing one’s folly, and lashing the ground with aimless, meaningless strokes lead to nothing—scarcely even to self-revelation.

Reggie took off his cap and wiped his forehead; he was surprised to find it wet beneath his curls. Then he became aware that he was hot all over and wondered what good *that* did? And what was he sitting there for? And what the deuce was the meaning of it all?

CHAPTER XI.

A LIGHT IN THE TOWER.

AT length the young man rose and straightened himself.

He was stiff and cramped from sitting still so long on a raw autumn night, and this combined with the ferment in his blood, made him shiver with heat and cold alike. The happy thought occurred to him that perhaps he was going to be ill.

To be ill, and have to lie in bed?

Yes, he would go to bed, sip slops, send for the doctor, and shut the door against everybody else.

The doctor would tell them at Tilbury Court that he had a patient at Old Cary Farm, and Lady Tilbury would be duly impressed and sympathetic—oh, she would be quite in a fuss, and down to inquire before he could look round—while Iva would be silent, with remorse at her heart.

Iva would not confide in her mother; of that he felt certain. She would listen to expressions

of anxiety and commiseration with an unmoved countenance, possibly with an incredulous smile.

Almost certainly she would not believe in the illness at the first, saying to herself, if not openly, that somebody had cried "Wolf!" too often, and that no more pity was to be wrung out of her.

But she could not hold out long if Thompson, whose dictum was law at Tilbury Court, were on his side.

Oh, if he could only be ill!

And then he could worry out the whole thing comfortably, and see if he were really such a—if he had gone and done such a—if he had not been fool enough to be scared by a—every sentence ran up as it were to a barred gate, and shied, instead of leaping to a conclusion.

Meantime, the young man stumbled along in the moonlight. He was sure he was going to be ill, he walked so queerly; like a ploughman clumping over the cobbles, or a sot lurching away from the public-house. Still more like old Father Stevens, as Iva called him, when hobbling off after a meditation from his hole in the wall.

Ill? He was certainly going to be ill. And why shouldn't he be ill? Why not he, as well as other people? Hang it! he *would* be ill if he chose. He had had a horrid afternoon, and

Iva ought to know that when a fellow has had one vile shock to begin with, it is not the time to go on letting out at him—it is enough to turn any one upside down to be mauled without being able to hit back. He could not defend himself, of course ; and now she had made him ill, and how would she like that ?

He decided to go to bed at once, and say he wanted no dinner. Luckily, he was not engaged to dine with Lady Tilbury, nor with anybody else ; so there would be a nice hot dinner awaiting him in his own quarters at the farm, and he would turn away from it—would say, with a shudder, it made him sick to look at it—and get between the sheets as quickly as possible. There, at least, would be peace, as far as the clash of outward elements was concerned.

No going up to Tilbury Court the next day, with his heart in his throat lest he should come across Iva alone, and a spasm at the very sight of the front door. Suppose she were to step out of it just as he stepped up !

Until now, Reggie had never thought himself a coward ; but, coward or not, he almost felt as if he would have faced death itself rather than Iva Kildare with no one standing by. The presence of others would be a support, and could he have ensured that, he would have

made a shift to comport himself as usual ; but there was always the dreadful chance.

Again, would Iva expect him? Would she look upon his present misdemeanour as only one of many to be pardoned after due expiation, or would she, like himself, feel that the earth had opened beneath her feet? Good God! how he loved her! And not to have known it—not to have suspected it—never once to have had a gleam of it till now!

Loved her? Of course he loved her. And she to taunt him with the miserable blunder he had been betrayed into, while that very blunder had rent open his own heart, and shown him her image enshrined there—her living, breathing image; not the poor thing that was now to raise the hue and cry, but the Iva in whose smile he had been so securely happy; whose frown was little less sweet than her smile; whose eyes had been his own, whose voice his own, whose simple presence had been all he cared for.

To be with her, just to be near her, filled him with an infinite content. There had been no analysis of emotions, no propounding of enigmas, no tiresome, unnecessary, impertinent questionings. All had been one bright, peaceful dream. Iva unkind to him? He had revelled in the unkindness. Iva cruel? He had

petted and pampered the cruelty, coaxing it into every sort of development, wheedling, enticing, basking in it like sunshine.

And he knew now why the rustling woods of Tilbury seemed to exhale sweeter odours than any other leafy glades; why the glinting stream danced along more merrily than other waters; and the wood-pigeons cooed like turtle-doves, and the browsing herds grouped themselves more picturesquely than deer. He knew why the very vapours which curled up from its great stacks of chimneys cheered his eye as he neared the mansion, hurrying thither day after day to make the most of every happy hour.

How was it possible that he had been blind so long? Iva—it had always been Iva. Long before he knew, it was the foreshadowing of the Iva that now was which had alike chained and charmed him. Had any one else interfered with his prerogative, diverted for one brief moment the current of her thoughts, such interposition would have revealed, as by a lightning flash, the perilous path he was treading; but he had never in his maddest moments dreamt of jealousy. No, it had all been smooth—smooth as Niagara before her leap.

Remarks had been made, it is true; brisk, pointed remarks such as Miss Lossett was deft

in the use of; but they might have been as blunt as the worn-out spikes on the gates of Old Cary Hall for all the impression they made on Reggie.

"What does the old cat mean?" he would drawl half aloud, if goaded to it; but he really did not trouble his head to consider what she meant.

He disliked Sophia. There were very few people in the world whom he actively disliked, and there was only one woman—Sophia Lossett.

Moreover, it is but due to him to say that this dislike was founded upon a solid sentiment—upon the profound conviction of her antagonism to his friends. Without going into the matter, or attaching to it the slightest importance, he knew by instinct that the hard-featured spinster had a pair of eyes which were ever on the watch, evilly disposed. When she spoke, her metallic voice grated upon his ear; and when silent, with thin, pursed lips, she was still more offensive.

Unluckily, he had always to pass the general's house in getting to and coming from Tilbury Court, and even when no Miss Sophia was visible, he fancied a stealthy tread behind the holly hedge as he went by—keeping close beneath, so that his grey cap should not over-

top it—and was conscious of a significant head nodding after him, counting up the number of times he turned in at the lodge gates.

Iva, who only thought of the Lossetts as a dull couple whom it was a charity to look in upon sometimes, had once or twice rallied Reggie upon this inveterate repugnance to his neighbours, but he had never replied : “ They hate *you* ; consequently I hate *them*,” as was the all-sufficient truth.

It may be wondered how it was that Iva and her mother, quick-witted as they were, had not divined this for themselves ; but the general and his daughter were careful people, who had no mind to be excluded from the great house of the neighbourhood, whose hospitalities formed almost their sole species of entertainment, and whose doings were endless theme for gossip.

Gossip was the very marrow of old Lossett’s bones. He lived to trot from house to house, conveying it and gathering more. Although he had met with a rebuff from “ the Irishwoman ” in her luxurious second widowhood, he comforted himself in that not only was the world in ignorance thereof, but that even his daughter had had the wisdom not to pry.

Lady Tilbury, holding out a friendly hand at the close of the crucial interview, had ex-

pressed gratitude for the compliment paid her, and that without any lurking innuendo; more, she had assured him of unchanged good will, and an ardent desire that the present friendly relations between the families should remain unaltered; adding with increased emphasis that she, for her part, would forget as quickly as possible that he had ever desired anything more.

Despite mortification and disappointment, the gallant soldier could not but perceive that the only thing which remained for him to do was to forget it with equal rapidity. He had nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by remembering.

Accordingly, by dint of schooling himself in the part, it soon became easy to meet the Tilbury carriage with hat uplifted and right-hand glove whipped off—General Lossett was a gentleman of the old school, and punctiliously ungloved before offering his hand to ladies; and although some tender qualms may be presumed to have lingered for a time in his manly bosom, and he may have wondered how a woman who had been content with a burly lout like Sir Thomas Tilbury (a mere yokel, without a grain of *aplomb* or *savoir vivre*) should not have thought his smart, soldierly self, V.C. and all, good enough for her—indeed,

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a great and glorious advance—still he had the wit to know when he was beaten, and to accept all the advantages of a voluntary surrender.

It was only in the most secret depths of a heart which had been honestly caught, not only by the widow's wherewithal, but by her pretty, good-humoured self, that the rejected suitor still nourished a feeble grudge. Sophia might vent her spleen ; he never did.

To the Tilburys themselves, however, even Sophia was smooth-faced, as we have said. Nobody was like dear Lady Tilbury for always having the loveliest flowers in her garden, the most exquisite ornaments in her house. No one had such horses, such delightful, comfortable carriages. (Sophy dearly loved a seat in one.) As for Lady Tilbury's dresses, and Iva's too, they were *always* pretty ; always so suitable, so becoming. "We look to Tilbury Court for all our ideas of fashion. We expect you and Iva to lead the way," she would cry in her shrill voice that made Reggie Goffe wince. "Of course, we can't imitate ; but we *do* like to see what is being worn ; and then you two show off to such advantage everything you put on, that it would be quite ridiculous if we were to attempt to copy. What guys we should be ! Quite grotesque ! But when *you* wear a long Newmarket coat, dear Lady Tilbury—it is

called a 'Newmarket,' is it not?—thank you, yes, I thought so—I quite *love* to see you in it."

"Oh, come along, come along," Iva would mutter in her mother's ear, and twitch her elbow, when the flattery had poured for so long that it might be presumed to have poured itself out. "Poor Sophia, she does lard it on so!" she would resume, after shaking off the incubus; "if she were not so deplorably humble, and so comprehensively admiring, one could stand it better. But when it extends to everything we do or wear, it is really—however, poor Sophia—I don't mean to be unkind; and, after all, she ought to disarm criticism, she is so very well-meaning, and does think so very, *very* much of us," which was all Miss Iva Kildare knew about it.

Reggie, who could have enlightened her, wisely held his tongue. It was not his business.

But it made him more than ever dislike encountering the thin figure, which would insist upon a stoppage, even when, with a hurried greeting, he was endeavouring to hasten past; and would demand the last news of Tilbury Court, even though the interlocutor must needs have been a very witch to know he had been there.

• We now know why our young gentleman, in

the midst of his distractions, still drew instinctively towards the shelter of the holly hedge as he passed General Lossett's small domain.

It was unlikely—indeed, highly improbable—that any one would be about at that hour; it was nearly seven o'clock, and seven on a November evening was dinner-time with most people—people of the old-fashioned order, living in a small way. He could picture to himself the Lossett pair seated opposite each other at their little square dining-table. Confound it! She was nothing of the kind! She was here at the gate, calling out directions to the little maid-servant in the doorway—something about “service being over”!

Sophia was going to church, then? Of course. It was a Wednesday, and Miss Lossett always attended the Wednesday evening service. That meant she would dart out upon him in another moment, and fasten like an octopus, stinging at every point; he would have to endure the torment for the entire length of the village. With a suppressed ejaculation he was across the road and up the steep bank on the other side, crouching behind a jutting angle of the wall, ere the enemy emerged.

He had “jockeyed” her for once. If she saw him, she could not come after him.

Neither could she stand still and shout: "Come down, you up there! Deliver yourself up."

Grim satisfaction for the moment predominated as he beheld the success of his stratagem; watched the unconscious spinster, foiled for once, snap to with a clang her little garden gate; look first one way, then the other; finally pick up her petticoats, and trot up the road.

So far, so good; but "She has eyes in her back," quoth he to himself, terror still upon him; "I don't risk following—not if I know it," and he crept along the wall on the bank. He crept till he came to the broken opening which was Father Stevens's peep-hole and his own; and here Reggie stood still, and then stood upright.

He stood upright in his amazement. Oh, there was no doubt now that he was going to be ill—going crazy, perhaps. What else could it be which made him see what he saw? What he saw was a light in the old tower—a distinct light, from one of the lower windows, the window of the great hall!

Miss Sophia Lossett and all else forgotten, he drew himself up to his full height, and with dilated eyeballs gazed upon the extraordinary sight. A light in Old Cary Hall at this time

of night! Lights at any time! The farmer's dame, whose duty it was to have occasional outbreaks of cleaning and sweeping in the empty house, invariably installed herself there, together with her damsels, their pails, and their brushes, during the early hours of the day; and windows were shut and doors fast bolted long ere dewy eve set in, even in summer time. It was incredible that she should be starting a new hour for her occupation of the place; but if not she, who else?

The mystery, however, was of short duration. At her own door stood worthy Mrs. Hodge, her ample form filling the doorway; but ere his lips could part to put a question it was forestalled. "O Mr. Reggie," cried the good soul, eager to be first with the news, "Mr. Reggie, my dear, who do you think is here? Who but your uncle himself! Sir Philip is here! He came two hours ago, and waited and waited for you; and now he's away down at the house."

"It was he, then? I saw lights ——"

"Aye, it's he; he's there. We gave him the lamp from the parlour; for, said he: 'I have work to do, and not too much time to do it in'. But he waited for you a long while first."

"I'll go to him."

"The dinner^{*} will be ready when you come back, Mr. Reggie. He told me to put it off a bit—till eight o'clock, he said. You won't mind, will you? I have sent out for some extras, and a good full dinner you shall have, though it will just be my own cooking, and you know what that is. Very plain, I'm afraid; and not what your uncle is used to ——"

"I'll go to him, Mrs. Hodge."

"Aye, do, sir. He told me to send you. For, said I: 'He won't be long, Sir Philip. If he's coming, he comes. That's to say, unless he stays at Tilbury Court ——' (There, now, he's off, and I can get to my dinner)," *sotto voce*, as no hearer was left; and away bustled the good woman, on hospitable thoughts intent.

Meantime, the very Reggie who had been about to spurn the homely meal of which a fragrant whiff assailed his nostrils in the doorway felt now—such is man—a little aggrieved that the new arrival had taken it upon himself to postpone its appearance. He did not know whether he were pleased or vexed by Sir Philip's unexpected arrival, but he knew that his dinner had been put off till eight, and he usually dined at a little after seven.

Also, he entirely forgot that he was going to be ill.

CHAPTER XII.

"BURY THE PAST, AND BE HANGED TO IT!"

"THAT'S about it, Reggie. I was regularly cornered, and there was nothing else to be done."

Uncle and nephew were seated in the old ancestral hall, dismal in the partial flare of a vulgar modern lamp, and Sir Philip had been smoking. He was trying to smoke now, but the cigar kept going out. Sir Philip's thin hands shook a good deal, and a variety of nervous movements testified that in spite of an assumed carelessness of demeanour he was in reality ill at ease.

"You see, my dear boy, there was literally nothing else for it!" repeated he, having waited in vain for the former remark to elicit a response.

Still the dear boy, even when thus apostrophised, remained dumb. What he would have liked to say, and could not say, was that if Sir Philip had kept away from Monte Carlo matters would have been different. For several years he had known nothing whatever of his uncle's

mode of life, but took for granted that the man who had vowed to him when a lad, with oaths the strongest and broadest, that no power in this world or any other should make him part with stick or stone of his inheritance would be true to his vow.

On the rare occasions when the two met, there had been no talk on the subject, but it had remained, or so the younger thought, an indissoluble bond of union between them. "Rather than let the old place go, we would make a bonfire of it, Reggie, my boy," Sir Philip had once said in his impetuous, hot-headed way; and Reggie, then a credulous schoolboy and ardent partisan, had absorbed the idea. He could not in the space of one half-hour alter the feeling of a lifetime.

"'Pon my soul, I don't see that you have much to complain of," proceeded Sir Philip querulously. "I should have done it before now, but for you. It has been suggested to me scores of times; by sensible men, too—men of the world, who knew what they were talking about. Seeing what a poor hard-up wretch I am, people are always coming up to me and saying: 'Bless my soul, Goffe, why don't you sell? It must be a d——d nuisance to you having a place you can never live at. Get rid of it, and have some money

in your purse.' Well, I thought of you, Reggie." The speaker paused, not without an eye to effect. And the pause and the softer accent did at length make some impression, though perhaps not all that had been calculated upon.

"Oh, it's all right, I suppose," said Reggie gloomily. "I thought ——" Then he too broke off in the middle of a sentence, and looked up and down the dark hall and into the arched roof overhead. "I would have hung on to it," he burst forth passionately, "if I had had to starve."

"No, you wouldn't." Sir Philip, relieved at last to be put on his defence, nodded and laid a hand on the other's knee. "You wouldn't, Reggie, my boy, if you knew what starving was. I don't say I have quite come to that either. But I have had to pinch and pinch; shirk this thing and that; keep away from old comrades, never show my face in London—lead the life of a dog, in short—and all for what? To bequeath to you the same sort of shambling, shuffling existence! You don't see it in that light? Neither did I at your age. I trusted to luck, and luck never came. We needn't go over it all; but you may take my word for it—I don't suppose you will; it's a fact, however, that I gripped these old stones with might and main long

after I felt them slipping from my hold. The place brings in nothing now—literally nothing. The rents barely cover the outlay. All I have had to live upon, and pay your allowance upon, has come from the shooting tenants, if we except a small legacy my mother left me, a matter of eighty pounds a year or so—not always that." He drew a breath, and puffed alight the cigar between his lips, which had again almost expired in ashes.

"I know you have been awfully good to me, sir," said the young man reluctantly. It was true that Sir Philip had been "good" to him; he could not but confess it.

"When I made up my mind that the thing had got to be done, and no bones about it," proceeded Sir Philip, gaining confidence, "I took your future into consideration from the outset. I said to my old friend De Bathe, 'It is for my nephew's sake, De Bathe, that I mean to sell,' and he saw it at once, and agreed with me *con amore*. We went into the matter thoroughly; and now you will exchange into a crack cavalry regiment—the way all cleared for you—the very man arranged with—and you will go at once to India, where your hundred a year in addition to your double pay will keep you in luxury. All that I have by the sale of

the old place shall be settled upon you, after—ahem!—my few debts of honour are satisfied; and in the meantime your allowance will be regularly paid. Of course, you will have to stick to foreign service; but that will be nothing to you, who have no particular tie in England, and no relations but myself. I'll come out and see you, by Jove!" his tones rising almost to the pitch of cheerfulness. "I'll look you up one of these days. Travel will be a new experience to me; and with a little brass in my pocket I shall enjoy it of all things. Cheer up, nephew! the world hasn't come to an end because one has had the courage to have an old tooth out. See, I have been rummaging among the chests and cupboards for an hour or so, and I find if we look round we shall be able to make a tidy sum out of—oh, no, we shan't put them up for auction—Good Lord, no!" catching sight of a horrified face, which warned him to beware; "but—but—the fact is," continued the speaker nervously, "'twould be no use hampering ourselves with a lot of lumber, and I thought: 'In for a penny, in for a pound'; so—so the long and the short of it is, he takes the whole thing, inside and out, off my hands—the furniture and—and rubbish; the china—and curiosities; useless encumbrances, all of them,

"BURY THE PAST, AND BE HANGED TO IT!" III

—at a valuation—after I have selected, and you have selected, anything in particular we wish to retain. Make your choice, my dear fellow ; take what you will. There are some trifles over yonder that belonged to your father ; they have always been yours, although I dare say you have forgotten all about them. And there is your grandmother's cabinet, with some knick-knacks, scarcely worth bothering about—still, if you fancy keeping them ? Eh ? And a whole box full of her clothes—queer old things. I had them out on the floor just now ; and there were some brocade dressing-gowns—most gorgeous affairs ; I don't suppose the purchaser—no, no ; we'll cart *them* off ; and I don't see why we should not divide them between us, and put them on our own shoulders, eh ? For my part," proceeded Sir Philip, who in his youth had been something of a dandy, "for my part"—with a shrug caught from foreign associates—"I shall certainly take one of these *gorgeosities* into wear. I have not had a decent dressing-gown for years—just got along with an old coat—I shall hardly know myself in a fine flowered brocade !"

It seemed to Reggie that he and his uncle had changed characters. When last the two met, it was Sir Philip who was peevish, morose, and disposed to be affronted by any interroga-

tion into his doings and movements. It was Sir Philip who was given to silent intervals, and quick, suspicious rejoinders, when what seemed to be only innocent prattle touched some sore spot of whose existence the boy was unaware.

Now, in his great bereavement, Sir Philip was almost gay. It only needed a little responsiveness, a modicum of interest and acquiescence on the part of his young relation, to make this dismal scene take a new aspect, and introduce into it life, animation, buoyancy. Reggie could not understand it.

But beneath it all he recognised a mysterious agency, working both for and against himself.

An hour before he had come to a deadlock in his own affairs. The old easy, happy life was for ever gone; and how to fill its place he knew not. Now it appeared as though Fate, or Providence—something or some one—had already taken his future out of his hands, and he had no choice but to go blindly forward in the way prepared.

"I don't wonder that you feel it, Reggie." Puffing slowly and luxuriously at a choice Havana, Reggie's companion presently looked mildly round. "I felt it myself—felt it deucedly at the first. I have got over it now. It doesn't do to be sensitive in these days, take my word for it, nephew. The world as it now stands is not made for sensitive people. We—you and

I—are out of place here, with our out-of-date prejudices. Take my advice and get rid of them. If I had got rid of them long ago it would have been the better for both of us; we should not have come to this pass. But while I was young"—Sir Philip sighed, swore, and drew a few long breaths from the now glowing cigar—"while I was young," he murmured regretfully, "all kinds of possibilities seemed open. Reggie, I don't mind telling you that I tried here and there, this way and that way—even matrimony, curse it!" Reggie started; the change of tone was so quick. "Matrimony," snarled his uncle, knitting together a pair of over-grown eyebrows—"matrimony is the very devil! You did not know I had ever married, did you?" He glanced askance.

"You—married?"

"Married a French girl, who was to have put me on my feet. It was all a 'do'. She had it in *francs*! How was I to understand *francs*? I didn't then, at any rate. And she died in time for me not to divorce her," nodding grimly. "Just in time, my boy! And the francs melted; and no one ever knew there had been a Lady Goffe. It was before your day, Reggie—before you can remember, anyhow—and there was no need for you to know that your uncle had been a fool. Since then I have sometimes thought—

there are three Tilbury girls, are there not? Any of them grown up?" with a new transition to abrupt, practical accents.

"No, sir."

"Humph! I thought they could hardly be. It seems only the other day—though I suppose it is a dozen years or so—that Tilbury married the Irish widow. It must have been a sell for him, having only daughters; but still they can inherit, I suppose?"

"I suppose so."

"What age is the eldest?"

"Fifteen."

"Fifteen. No go. You couldn't have waited for her, anyway. And ten to one—a hundred to one—it would never have come off if you had. How do they inherit?"

"What do you mean, sir?" coldly.

"Mean? I mean what I say. How are the estates left? Who comes first? Or are the girls joint heiresses? And how many are there of them?"

"There are three of them. But upon my word, I have no idea how Sir Thomas left it in his will. Lady Tilbury knows; but no one else does, I fancy—not even Iva."

"Iva? Who's Iva?"

"Iva Kildare," said Reggie reluctantly, "Lady Tilbury's own daughter. She ——"

"Lady Tilbury's own daughter? You don't mean to say that the Tilbury girls—that Sir Thomas ——?"

"No, sir, it was a slip." In spite of his dislike of the subject, the young man could scarce forbear a smile. "The Miss Tilburys are of course Sir Thomas and Lady Tilbury's children—their only children; but Iva was—was ——"

"Aye, to be sure. The widow had a child. I remember hearing so. And she brought it with her, did she? Kildare? I once knew a Kildare in the Blues."

"Iva's father was not in the Blues."

"Iva's a queer name. She's older than the others, this Iva, then? Of course," catching a second smile. "Don't laugh at me, you young dog!" jocosely. "Family matters are not in my line; and I never gave the Tilburys a thought except as they might affect you. Of course, if it had been on the cards that you and one of Tilbury's girls ——"

"It would never have been. You may set your mind at rest about that."

"Very well; very good; it does set my mind at rest, though you scoff at the idea. *If*—mind, I say *if*—there had been any chance of such a thing coming about, it would have made me feel very much worse about all this than I do now. It would have raised a confoundedly

difficult question. As there is nothing, and no likelihood of it—you are being straight with me, Reggie? You are keeping nothing back? Mind, I am giving you my confidence; give me yours, if we are to work together. You are quite clear, then, you have never had any intention of ——?”

“Of building up my fortunes by means of Maud, Mabel, or Marianne Tilbury?” said Reggie, deliberately pronouncing each name. “I am absolutely sure I have never had, nor would have. That kind of thing ——”

“Jars upon your taste, eh?” Sir Philip’s thin lips twitched with a faint, unsuccessful attempt at irony. “So be it. It did once upon mine; a pity it did not go on doing so. Well, well, we are as we were, then—just you and I—no one but ourselves to consider. So” —with a long pause at the word—“the thing is done. Done, done, done—and can’t be undone! The old place is gone; the tooth is out; and all we have now to do is to bury the past, and be hanged to it!” He sprang to his feet, lightly for a man of his years, and, as anxious to close the discussion, began hurriedly collecting his appurtenances preparatory to departure.

“Are we here for the last time, sir?” Reggie, who had risen also, looked into his uncle’s face as he put the question.

“For the last time? No, no—hang it all, no!

That's to say, we can come in the morning—plenty of time in the morning, and better light too. You can look about you, and see what you want. We do not leave till the afternoon. Come again and look round, by all means. You won't have much time; you must get your kit together, and I suppose you will wish to say a few 'Good-byes' to your friends? The Tilburys, for instance? I'll go with you there."

"You will? I am glad of that." For the first time throughout the entire interview the young man spoke frankly and heartily. Sir Philip, alive to the altered note in an instant, met it with the same.

"To be sure I'll go. Very glad to do the civil to any one who has been civil to you. They always made you at home at Tilbury, didn't they?"

"Always."

"Ah, you don't like the parting?" Sir Philip, again observant, took a second look. "Very natural, I'm sure. It's almost a pity you couldn't—however, 'tis all right. Oh, I'll go there, and anywhere else; though, of course, my time is limited."

"I shan't trouble you to go anywhere else."

"We'll do no more to-night, then. Carry the lamp, will you? The good soul at the farm brought it here—but, bless my life! it only lights up enough of these huge places to make

'darkness visible' except for a yard or two round. Go first, Reggie ; I'll lock up as I follow. Mind you don't trip—the steps are shallow and slippery. Are you all right ? Go on ahead, then ; I'm behind you." But he was not close behind.

He had got outside, and he never meant to go again within.

Never more would he cross that threshold. The great key turned in the rusty lock for the last time so far as he was concerned. He drew it out, never again to fit it in its place.

But had the younger man, who with grief at his heart tramped before, crunching the gravel beneath his heavy feet—had he turned round, he would not, perhaps, have judged the elder as he did.

Sir Philip stood still in the darkness, for the moon had disappeared, and slowly lifted his cap, his eyes fixed upon the lonely pile.

It was his birthplace—the home of his childhood—the legacy of many generations. On the morrow it would be his no longer.

Bareheaded he stood before it now.

What pang of bitterness untold passed through that once gay, proud heart, as he stood and gazed, was for himself alone—never to be revealed, never to be reverted to ; but 'twas said afterwards that he babbled about it on his deathbed.

CHAPTER XIII.

SIR PHILIP TAKES HEART O' GRACE.

THE following morning dawned clear and bright, and the old grey house, which in the struggling moonbeams of the night before had seemed so weird and mournful, took a new aspect.

It looked sturdy, stout, and strong ; as though endowed with fortitude to endure through many a year to come, whatever of good or ill fortune there might yet be for it in store. The very moss upon the garden walls shone a bright vivid green in the sunshine ; the old weathercock on the stable tower, glinted as it gently revolved in the fresh, frosty air ; and every turret and jutting angle of the massive walls stood out boldly and cheerily against the blue sky overhead.

And if the ancient mansion had regained its hardihood with the dawn of day, so also had Sir Philip, though no longer its owner.

He had dreaded—as who would not have dreaded?—the scene recorded in the last chapter ; had winced before it almost to the point

of making all arrangements by letter, and blotting out from his memory thenceforth the fact that he had ever possessed either an inheritance or a nephew.

But the tie of blood in both cases was too strong.

No, he would not shirk; hang it all!—he would not have it said he had shirked, infernally disagreeable as the whole thing was.

Reggie, poor boy, should not have that to think of his uncle, whatever else he had. Reggie and he had always been good friends, and “I believe he’s the only living soul who cares two straws whether I live or die!” muttered Sir Philip, gnawing his grey beard, (for he had grown a beard, as General Lossett wished to have done, to avoid the horrors of shaving with blunt razors, tepid water, and small ill-hung looking-glasses).

While the fate of Old Cary Hall hung in the balance, the baronet often looked at his beard, undecided as to whether it became him or not. With better times, he would of course be able to afford all the little comforts his soul loved, and those would certainly include an entire new shaving apparatus, should he conclude to divest himself of what journalists designate the “hirsute appendage”; but, after all, the hirsute appendage was warm and com-

fortable, and saved a confounded lot of trouble. When he pulled it to one side and the other to see how he would look without it, he was by no means sure that he would look better.

The beard was grey, but it was fairly thick, and had a slight curl. Having passed through the early stages of stubble growth, and run the gauntlet of his friends' exclamations, having even obtained from the latter some favourable opinions as soon as the novelty had worn off, he was inclined to pause before taking any further step. He would consult Reggie. And so entirely had trifles gone to make up the sum of his poor vagabondish life for many years past, that in finally deciding to go down to Somersetshire, it went for more than Sir Philip would have owned any one, the taking of Reggie's opinion on this important matter.

As he now sprang out of bed, and peered from the latticed window of his little room—a clean, pleasant chamber, infinitely preferable to the dingy apartments he was accustomed to—he pulled his beard quite cheerfully, and yawned and stretched himself with an amount of complacency he had certainly not experienced for many a bygone day. The tooth was out, and the jaw was already healing.

Certes, he had no intention of starting any fresh ache by further probing of memories,

of associations, by another visit to the halls of his forefathers. On that point he was as firm as he had been the night before; for firmness coincided with inclination.

"There can easily be no time," nodded he, withdrawing from the window. "'Tis a fine day, and I must look round. It will only be civil to call at one or two of the farms—no, confound it! I couldn't do *that*—couldn't stand the talk and questioning—but I can pretend to Reggie that I will. We might have made a bolt for it after breakfast but for him. He has got to pack his traps, and take leave decently. It would not do for him to skulk off as if in disgrace. Besides, it is safe to get about that I have been down, and if I am seen by no one, and go nowhere, there would be nasty things said. As it is, if I make my appearance on the roads—if I am seen walking along pretty fast, with papers sticking out of my pocket—it will go down all right. The Hodges will say I was pressed for time, and had a lot of business to get through. The Hodges? Hum!"—meditating—"we must tell them, I suppose? Or, no; I don't see why we should. Writing will do. It will be enough for the present that they should know Reggie is about to be transferred to another regiment—a better regiment—and

go to India sooner than he expected. They know he was to have gone next year, anyway. They can easily be made to understand that he is keen to get out into the world, ——”

Suddenly Sir Philip paused in his dressing operations, with a hand uplifted, an idea having just occurred to him. “I suppose he *is* keen?” he murmured half aloud.

So full had he been of his own story, and so anxious to present the part he was playing in its most favourable aspect, that he had neither marked at the time nor could now recall in what fashion his nephew had received the first tidings of that which mainly concerned himself, namely, his transfer and its immediate consequences.

“He was dying for it once; I suppose he hasn’t altered his mind,” ruminated Sir Philip, buckling straps anew. “And he certainly *said* he was pleased, and thanked me. Of course, he was not pleased at the sale; and of course, like an inconsiderate greenhorn, he did not reflect that but for the sale he might have whistled for his transfer. But, poor lad, he’s young and callow, and he loves the old bones—loves them as I did once—dash it all! no more thinking about that now!” he broke off, with an angry twitch of his neckcloth.

“But I can’t blame Reggie,” pursued Sir

Philip, choking down other sensations. "I should be far more vexed with him if he did not care. Not one young man in a hundred would care twopence, as long as he could swagger in a fine regiment, and cut a dash. But I thought Reggie had a drop of the old blood in his veins. I thought it would sting; and, by Jove, it *did* sting! How he jumped when he took it in! I—upon my word, it was a bad half-minute for *me*. No more of that for Phil Goffe, thank you! You don't catch me going through another experience in the tapestry hall. Pshaw! what am I meandering on about? He won't desire it any more than I. He can go by himself—probably would prefer it—and be free to pick and choose as he pleases. Yes; I shall tell him at breakfast he is to be quite untrammelled, and that anything he fancies he may look on as his own. He need not even tell me what he takes," proceeded Sir Philip, with a sensation of magnanimity, and some real kindness to boot. "It would only make us both have the blues afresh. If he takes along an old box—I daresay Mrs. Hodge could furnish one—and packs it there and leaves it, one of the farm men could be sent to fetch it just before we go. When do we go? Let me see," extracting from his papers a penny book on local trains, with which he had provided

himself the night before. (N.B.—He would gladly have made use of it then and there, and looked at the yellow cover with animation now.)

"Ah! here we are!" continued Sir Philip, pouncing upon a page, and following a column downwards with his finger. "One o'clock. Three-thirty. Five-forty-five. Five-forty-five? Ye-es. Yes, that might do. Rather late; but we have nothing to do when we get up, and a long evening together—no, no; a long evening together would not be the best possible conclusion to a day of this sort. We'll shorten it, Reggie—or rather, we'll cut it out. Arrive about nine-thirty, eat, and go to bed. Tomorrow, we'll do the Horse Guards, the Rag, tailors, outfitters, everywhere. He will soon get into the spirit of the thing. Gad! I shall enjoy it too—this part of the business over. And yesterday was the worst day—oh, decidedly it was the worst!" concluded he, briskly brushing hair and beard, and pausing for a few minutes to contemplate the latter.

"'Pon my word, I—I think it makes me rather a fine-looking fellow!" cried the poor butterfly baronet, with a feeble flutter of his singed wings.

And he stepped across the room to open the door, with a step that was almost a strut.

CHAPTER XIV.

REGGIE AND SIR PHILIP.

"MORNING, Reggie!"

A glance at his nephew's countenance decided Sir Philip to go on talking, without waiting for rejoinders which might be long in coming.

"Beautiful morning!" continued he, rubbing his hands with a brisk, business-like air. "Took a whiff of ozone from my window before I came down. Glorious it was! And the leaves are still on the trees, I see; and the old rooks bustling about. I saw a couple of wild duck too. Been after duck, Reggie? There used to be some very decent ducking down by the stream. Snipe and woodcock too, if I remember rightly. They ought to be here by now. Oh, there's no place in the world like Old England on a fine autumn morning—ahem!"—recollecting too late that this was not precisely the keynote best suited to conversation on the present occasion—"that's to say, the Old England that used to be—the Old England I was brought up to—not the England of to-

day. Times are changed, and we must march with the times. But 'tis pleasant to—come, come, nephew, look a little less glum about it, can't ye? Things might be worse. Anyhow, I have lost at least as much as you; and it is rough on me to have to do *all* the cheerfulness. . . . Eh? What? You think I have had time to recover from the first shock? . . . So I have. And I mean to hold fast by the recovery. It is all for the best; and come what may, we'll have no ill-blood between us. Shake hands, my boy."

"All right, sir." Reggie, who had been standing by the window, only half hearing the stream of prattle, and wholly indifferent to its tenor, turned round as he spoke, and held out the hand his uncle waited for. "I'm afraid I haven't helped you much," he said, then suddenly forced a few rapid utterances, the composition of which had come to him in the night. "It is awfully difficult for a fellow to speak, Uncle Philip; but I don't want you to think me ungrateful, and all that. Of course, you have a right to do as you please with your own, and of course it's not as if I were your son ——"

"If you were my son, it must have come to this just the same; remember, there is no entail now. Although you are recognised, and I intend to make you my heir, you have no legal

rights," emphatically. "Even had you possessed any, I think—I fancy—no heir of mine, would have gone against me, now that things are at this pass. Surely, Reggie, you do not mean—you cannot mean that you would wish me to leave debts of honour unpaid?" The colour stole into Sir Philip's thin cheeks as he looked keenly for the answer.

"N-no—no—of course not." But the young man drew a sigh, and paused. "I can't explain it," he went on after a while, "because I do not myself understand how I feel. I know you are right ——"

"That's a good lad!"

"And I do believe," with an emphasis which was for himself alone, "that it is the best thing in the world for *me*."

"Aha! You have found that out?"

"But the physic is bitter," said Reggie, with a wry smile. "It is horrible. It wrings my mouth and scalds my throat in the swallowing."

"Aye; so it did mine—skinned it."

"If you could have kept a few acres—ever so few—just to preserve some sort of link ——"

"No, no, my boy. No link. The chain is rusty—covered with gangrene; snap it, and throw it away. 'Tis the only thing to do."

"I have always looked upon Old Cary Hall as a home, and it is the only home I ever knew."

"A poor sort of home," muttered Sir Philip, but he regarded his nephew with a kindlier eye. "It speaks well for you, young man—deucedly well, I must say—that you should give so much affection where you have got so little; but some of these days you will want a very different kind of domestic hearth, and how would it have suited you to have had nothing but the cold ashes in those rooms up yonder?" pointing over his shoulder—"nothing but them to call your 'ain fireside,' with no chance of kindling them into life again? I like your spirit, Reggie; 'pon my soul, I do. It does me good to find there is some family feeling, some pride, still left on the face of the earth; but—ha, here comes good Mrs. Hodge with our breakfast"—not unwilling to change the subject. "A fine old teapot that, Mrs. Hodge, and a rare tea-maker, I'll warrant! I have been so long accustomed to coffee for breakfast that ——"

"Coffee, Sir. Philip? If I had thought of it, now ——"

"By no means. That was the last thing I meant." Sir Philip, all courtesy, threw out his hands in deprecation, another trick he had contracted abroad. "Tea—good English tea—will be a treat to me. And as for those eggs

and bacon and sausages—it seems we are to be well fortified for our work to-day, Reggie,” cried he, helping himself with a liberal hand. “Does Mrs. Hodge always victual you like this?” laughing pleasantly to the gratified dame. “Because, if so, you ought to do her more credit. You are as lean as I. Isn’t that so, Mrs. Hodge?”

“’Tis not in the family to be stout, Sir Philip.”

“The family has not always been so well treated.” Sir Philip poured the rich cream into his cup with the enjoyment of a schoolboy. “’Pon my word, this is most luxurious! Your own baking, mistress?” tearing off a crusty hunch from the loaf in front of him.

“Just my own, Sir Philip. And the butter is only out of the churn an hour ago. The girl churned on purpose. So I know *it* will please you,” cried the worthy woman, laying a stress upon the “it,” as inferring that all the rest was nothing. “But indeed ’tis so little we have to offer—though, to be sure, more eggs—they could be done in a minute ——”

“No more—no more indeed. Why, Mrs. Hodge, we shall hardly get through what we have got here. No, no; here’s a breakfast fit for a king!” and Sir Philip ate, and praised, and chatted, and feasted, with an adaptation to

the humour of his hostess and appreciation of her humble efforts on his behalf, which Reggie could not but own to be both wise and kindly.

He wished he could have followed suit ; but what would have been his own impulse twenty-four hours before was now an impossibility.

"Summat's gone wrong with the poor lamb," decided the farmer's wife, retiring at last with her apron corner between her fingers. "Summat's upset him. He doesn't like his uncle's coming, and he doan't seem as if he could eat wi' him comfortable. 'Twas the same wi' his dinner last night. Eh, but Sir Philip's a fine gentleman, and 'tis a pleasure to see *him* eat so hearty anyway," and she trotted off to attend to other appetites.

"You will have a hornet's nest about your ears, if you don't put a better face upon it, Reggie," observed Sir Philip dryly, as the door closed. "If this gets wind ——"

"It must get wind sooner or later."

"You don't wish to be here when it does? Let them clack when we two are safe out of hearing. London din will shut it out of our ears. Or, better still, I can ask to have the sale kept dark till after you start for India. That will be in a week's time, and no one could think it unreasonable to wait a week. I understand that he is a very decent fellow."

"Who?"

"Who? The man who has bought the place. The owner now—confound him!—of Old Cary Hall. I told you I had signed and sealed."

"Have you met him—the man?"

"Never set eyes on him. There was no need for it. Worthington managed the whole thing, and I must say did it beautifully. Found a purchaser, bargained with him, got a very respectable price out of him, and even recollected the fittings and—the—the odds and ends we spoke about last night. By the way, I am afraid I shall not be able to go with you to the old place this morning. I have been looking over my papers, and find there are too many things chalked out for me to do already. (He's not inquisitive; he will never inquire what they are," mentally.) "So, if you will just excuse me, my dear boy, you can have the keys and go where you like, and take what you like. Will that suit you, eh?"

"Thank you, yes." It suited Reggie particularly; he had been pondering how to manœuvre this very getting away by himself. "I suppose I may go at once?"

"As soon as you please. Directly you have finished your breakfast. When you come back you will want to pack up, and,

I daresay, to write some letters. I have letters too," continued Sir Philip, with a brisk reflection that here was a safe and orthodox outlet. "I'll just take a look round and have my cigar first, then come in and write. And before luncheon—by the way, what time shall we go to the Tilburys? Shall we lunch with them, eh?"

"Better not, sir. They have visitors arriving to-day. And I fancy—yes, I know I heard they were lunching either early or late, I forget which, on that account. The visitors were to come about the middle of the day. Our going might be ——"

"*Mal à propos*. As you please. You know best. What time shall we go, then?"

"Later on they are nearly always at home. They are sure to be so to-day, because of these people coming, and the horses having had to go so far already. Lady Tilbury spoke of sending to a distant station." (He had thought it all out in the night.) "Our best plan will be to be packed and ready for departure by three o'clock, then walk up; if we find no one in, we can take a turn in the garden and wait. Considering what errand we come on ——" he turned his head aside, affecting to be engaged with Jess, the spaniel, that had crawled to his feet.

Sir Philip stole a glance. "Faith, this is a little queer!" quoth he to himself.

It was something, however, to have found a subject on which his uncommunicative nephew would talk, and he took mental note that whenever conversation flagged he could always set it going again by a remark about the Tilburys.

Obviously the Tilburys had counted for a good deal in Reggie's life, and as obviously no one else—at the present moment—counted for anything. The traveller had no one else to whom farewell was to be said. He professed no desire to communicate the great change which had taken place in his life to any other human being.

"I'll just pack up, and tell the Hodges to—to look after Jess," he said, "unless ——"

"Take her with you to Tilbury Court. Lady Tilbury would give the poor brute a home for your sake, I doubt not."

"I was thinking so," said Reggie slowly. But he was not thinking precisely so. He was substituting another name for that of Lady Tilbury.

CHAPTER XV.

"ALL'S OVER NOW."

THE ladies were in the garden, and saw the gentlemen approaching.

One was Reggie, of course, and Iva flushed and shook a little as she discerned the well-known figure; but who could the other be?

"Some one he has fished up to bring along and tide over the awkwardness," concluded she, relieved by the idea. "That shows *some* sense, at any rate. We shall have to laugh it off, and have a sort of silly reconciliation; and I must get that thing out of him, or at any rate have his solemn promise that he will put it with the rest, and have no sort of sentimental nonsense about it in the future. It was just what I was afraid of—something of this kind—when I told mother we should have to keep that boy at arm's length; but I never guessed *how* bad it would be. Well, I have got to go through with it;" and Miss Kildare turned to the young visitor whom she was escorting through the flower-borders. "Have you ever met Reggie Goffe?"

Oh, yes, I am sure you have. He is always here, when he is not anywhere else—I mean when he is on leave, and is not shooting or fishing at houses—I mean ——”

“Who can that be with Reggie, Iva?” came Lady Tilbury’s voice from the rear.

“Can’t imagine, dear mother,” cried Iva gaily back.

And when Reggie presented his uncle, even Sir Philip felt it odd to be so absolutely unrecognised in his native place.

He could, however, find no fault with his reception; indeed, the announcement of his name caused quite a little sensation in the group; and Lady Tilbury, who had never yet acquired the properly passive demeanour of the British matron, coloured and exclaimed with an animation which made her look handsomer than ever.

Unfortunately, it was too late in the day for Sir Philip now to think so. He had sold his lands, let Lady Tilbury look as charming as she chose.

But, at any rate, he would enjoy the very becoming warmth and effusiveness of her welcome; he would respond with gallantry, and accept the position of chief guest with alacrity. He stroked his beard, perked his head, recalled that he had seen a fine-looking man in the glass that morning, and set about talking to her

agreeable ladyship with all the zest in the world.

"Miss St. Leger has just come over from Ireland, Reggie," said Iva, conducting her small party behind. It had been reinforced by Miss St. Leger's aunt, who had been ousted by Sir Philip.

"Such a beautiful country!" cried the young lady, thus indirectly appealed to. "And we were stopping in such a beautiful part! Do you know Ireland well?" and she proceeded to accept the young man with whom she had been tacitly presented. Iva fell back and walked with the aunt.

"She shan't be shunted a second time, poor soul," quoth she, able now to laugh again—now that the momentous meeting was over, and nobody the worse. Lady Tilbury had cross-questioned her daughter with some pertinacity on the previous evening, but had got nothing out of Iva. Iva had allowed—that was to say, she had not denied—that things had gone cross between her and Reggie Goffe, and that one of the old discords had taken place between them; but she had refused flatly to say what the discord was. He had been tiresome and heedless—just like a great silly boy—was all she would aver.

"You yourself say: 'What is the use of

being angry with him?' " cried Lady Tilbury at last, "and that there is nothing he likes better than to get people angry with him; yet you have just walked into his trap!" But if she thought that Iva would walk into hers she was mistaken. Iva was not to be caught.

Iva had recognised the difference between Reggie's present misdeed and former ones. This one was involuntary. Therein lay an appalling line of demarcation.

It was so every way appalling that it called for an entirely new coat of armour on her part. She had, it is true, been betrayed into a momentary explosion; but she had thought things over in the night, and cooled down.

After all, she was a woman; and let a woman be ever so wroth with homage to her charms, she will melt in time.

To be sure, she mused, Reggie was—there was no reason why Reggie should not be—if Reggie *were* impecunious, and impossible, that did not prevent his—his having feelings like other men. They all knew he was fond of them—of the family, as a family. In her own heart she also knew that he was—was fondest of her. "Of course, he always liked me best," she told herself frankly. And a little voice within announced further that she would have been indignant at the bare idea of not being liked best.

But she certainly meant the liking to stop there. Reggie was just to be Reggie—their own appropriated Reggie. She was half vexed now, now even when she had herself passed him on to her friend, to see how well the two got on together. He was quite Ethel's "form," of course. Just the sort of smart-looking man Miss St. Leger was accustomed to; and his looking graver, and somehow older than usual, was so much in his favour. He looked his full age—even more—as he strolled along, not in his usual rough tweed and gaiters, but in a well-made suit—what Iva knew to be his best suit.

What had he put on his best suit for? Out of respect to his uncle? It was not like Reggie to do this; he never changed for anybody when merely walking about the country side. But Sir Philip, being also carefully attired, might have instigated the new departure; he might have suggested to his nephew that it was hardly *de rigueur* to make a morning call all in the rough—not knowing the very intimate terms upon which Reggie stood at Tilbury Court.

She had just satisfied herself as to the probability of this explanation when another was offered, and one which, in spite of herself, made her start. Sir Philip had just reached the point with Lady Tilbury when he felt it incumbent on him to take advantage of an open-

ing for broaching the purport of his re-appearance in his own country.

The party had reached the end of a long gravel-path, which terminated only in a view ; and consequently it was necessary to turn round and retrace their steps if continuing to walk. Iva, coming up last of the couples with her despised spinster, was now addressed, conjointly with her mother, by Lady Tilbury's companion.

"You won't be best pleased with me, my dear ladies, when I confess what brings me to Somersetshire just now," said Sir Philip, summoning all the ease he could command : "rather cool of me to say so, but still I can't help flattering myself you will miss the boy. I am carrying off Reggie—carrying him straight off with me to London this afternoon, *en route* for India."

"Reggie!" Lady Tilbury stood still in her astonishment, then looked over her shoulder. Reggie was close behind her ; Iva in front, facing Sir Philip. "Reggie? *You?* Going to India—*to-day?*" cried the warm-hearted creature, almost with a scream ; "going *to-day?*"

"Within the hour, Lady Tilbury." It was Sir Philip who spoke—Sir Philip, with both amusement and animation in his voice. On the whole, he rather enjoyed his *coup*.

"It is my doing," proceeded he briskly. "Entirely my doing. He knew nothing whatever about it until I took him by storm last night. Came down upon him with the news, and took his breath away. Fact is, he has always been hankering after a cavalry regiment, and cavalry regiments are dam—extremely expensive things. But I have contrived to arrange it for him at last, and he will be transferred to the — Dragoon Guards this week, and join at once. The regiment is at Peshawur. That leaves us no time to spare, you see ; so I came down to fetch my nephew, and also to explain to him—hum—ha—how I was able to afford the transfer." (It must be owned that Sir Philip possessed one fine art, what has been denominated "the art of putting things". Who was to guess that the generosity so described was in reality a mere sop to quiet any possible outcry on the part of a defrauded heir, also, perhaps, to relieve the speaker's own conscience, which pointed out that however cogent were the causes which prompted his course of action, he had consulted nobody in adopting it?) "I have had to sell my estates," he said pointedly.

"Your estates? Old Cary Hall, and ——"

"All there was to sell." Sir Philip waved his hand, but a close observer might have seen his lips twitch. "Yes, my dear madam, that

is what we poor impoverished landowners all come to—at least, you Tilburys are more fortunate, and long may you remain so!—but I fancy Sir Thomas did not entirely depend on land, as I do. Oh, to be sure! It is we unfortunates, who have never worked for our bread”—(he could not resist the insinuation. Sir Thomas's younger brother had reinforced the Tilbury coffers from Liverpool dockyards) —“we have got to starve now, to teach us better ways,” concluded Sir Philip, with an affectation of jocosity. “Reggie and I will be known in Somersetshire no more, Lady Tilbury. But—well, well; think kindly of us when you think at all; and—we'll quit the subject, if you please, my dear lady,” and he held out a shaky hand and looked at her with a watery smile.

Such an ending obliterated the beginning. No one could now feel as they had been feeling, that the speaker was heartless and contemptible. Lady Tilbury even went so far as to hold and press the shaking hand, the while such sympathy streamed from her fine eyes that poor Sir Philip, beneath its consolatory influence, revived and flourished afresh. 'Gad, he wished—he did wish—he had known this charming widow sooner.

As it was, however, he suffered himself to

be led gently towards the house ; and though he looked at his watch, and queried how long it took to drive to the station, and how long to walk from Tilbury front door to the farm, he was persuaded at last that another half-hour might be conceded, and followed the mistress of the mansion into her drawing-room.

The rest of the party straggled irresolutely after.

A thousand voices were ringing in Iva's ears. "Going to India! Going *to-day*! Now! Never to return! Never, at any rate, to be as once the intimate, dear, familiar friend—the Reggie of years and years—of winters and summers! Never more to be seen hurrying across the park, waiting in the roadway, hailing the carriage with his joyous, confident call! Going with yesterday's angry flare for his last memory of the house that had almost been his home! Going with no word of explanation—no whisper of regret!

Oh, she saw it all now!

The altered dress, the unwonted demeanour, the troubled, averted eye. Not once had it been raised during Sir Philip's narration; no movement either of face or figure had co-operated.

Miss St. Leger had turned to her companion

with a simper and a "How interesting! How excited you must be! How I wish I were in your place!" and he had responded with a mechanical smile and an inaudible mutter.

Older? He looked twenty years older; he looked old enough for anything.

The minutes were passing.

Were they to part where Sir Philip was calling a halt in front of the door, to have no chance of, no loophole for—for one kind word, one murmur of forgiveness? A thought occurred to Iva.

"Will you please follow my mother?" she addressed her visitors courteously. "Reggie, show them the way. I must go and fetch the girls from the schoolroom; they will want to—to say 'Good-bye'." She was half up the staircase, when there came a flying tread behind her. She knew who it was.

"Not there," said Reggie hoarsely, seeing she was about to turn in at the nearer doorway. "Let that wait. I'll see them—oh, yes, I'll see them"—impatiently—"but here—come in here," pushing open a small empty sitting-room, once Sir Thomas's den, now unused. "Iva, you *must* come in!" shutting the door. "You must give me these few last minutes. It is all over, you know; all *that* is over and done with; never mind what happened yester-

day, it seems so little and so old—so long ago. When I left here last night, I—all I thought of was to get you to forgive me—and to let me keep the photograph—and—and perhaps—never mind what. That's all at an end. You *must* forgive me now?" He paused; she mutely inclined her head.

"We are friends, are we not, Iva?"

"Yes."

"You don't mind my holding your hand?"

"No."

"What I want to say is that I shall never forget you. I don't know what I am going to do, nor what sort of a life I am going to lead. Like other fellows, I suppose. I'll try to keep straight, and work my way up in the service, and shoot and fish when I go on leave, and—but I shan't come back to England. All's over here. . . . Of course, you will marry. Why shouldn't you? I—I hope you will—at least, I think so. But it can't do any one any harm for you to know that a poor fellow who once loved you goes on loving you. Because I shall. Shall I tell you how I know I shall? Because there has never been a time in my life when I have not. . . . Oh, don't cry. It's true, and I'm glad of it. . . . I found it out last night. Your being so angry with me—no, it wasn't that; it was my caring so much

about it, and—and other things that came out because of it, all together laid bare what had been hidden even from myself. You don't mind my telling you, do you, dear? . . . I felt as if I couldn't go away without your knowing ——”

And he repeated it over and over again.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour. “I must go,” said Reggie hurriedly. “We were to have left before this. It will take all our time to get off now. Iva”—he bit his lip—“Good-bye,” he said quietly, both hands in his.

“Good-bye,” came in a tremulous whisper back.

A long sigh, and he walked slowly to the door, she standing where she was.

But at the door Reggie turned, and paused for an instant as irresolute. Then he moved back to her side. “Iva,” he said, “I *can't* go without ——?”

It took but a few seconds, that embrace which was to last a lifetime.

There was one mute, imploring movement, one solitary kiss—nay, it scarce had any passion in it, it was so sad, so tender, and so hopeless—and the two fell apart, his arms dropping from her waist.

Her eyes blind with tears, she heard the door close.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. JABEZ DRUITT.

"I MUST own I do not see it in the light you do."

The speaker, a pleasant-looking man between forty and fifty years of age, coloured slightly as he spoke, and his hesitating accents sounded as if he were anxious to convince himself even more than the person to whom they were addressed.

That person was his brother, and an older, bulkier, and harder-featured edition of himself. No one could ever have mistaken Amos Drutt for anything but a business man, a clumsily-built, ill-dressed, probably rich and prosperous partner in a commercial house. He looked the character—knew that he did—and had no desire to look anything else. To his mind a Manchester merchant was anybody's equal—so long as (metaphorically) his pockets bulged.

What, therefore, Jabez meant by "cutting the concern" at his time of life, withdrawing his share of the capital, and turning his back

upon Change, with all its merry ups and downs, interest, excitement, and almost invariable profit, was to the elder Mr. Druitt inexorable. He had always thought his younger brother a fool, but it appeared that Jabez was a bigger fool than he had believed possible.

Some intimation of this had just elicited the remark wherewith this chapter opens, and the contempt of the senior partner had caused the rising colour on the junior's cheek.

"I do not see things as you do, Amos. I never have, as you know. With me business has always been the means to an end, not the end itself. I have worked here for over twenty years ——"

"What have I done?" A brusque, pertinent interruption.

"Ten years more, I admit. You are ten years older than I, and might have retired at my age had you chosen. I have often wondered you did not."

"Wouldn't be paid to do it. Retire? And pray, what should I do with myself if I were to retire, as you call it—stagnate, as I call it?"

"Still I cannot see that your inclinations need control mine. It is not my opinion that I shall 'stagnate,' and it is my intention to 'retire'." And, in spite of the moderation with which the opinion was announced, it was

obvious that Mr. Jabez Drutt would adhere to his intention.

"Oh, you will do as you please, of course," sneered the elder brother. "Leave the dung-hill behind you and strut upon the housetop. You think you will be mistaken for a 'fine old country gentleman,' I suppose? That no one will ever know that you have trod a warehouse, or sampled a cotton bale? You think that people will accept you at your own valuation, without taking the trouble to inquire where you came from, or where your money comes from?" He stopped to grin, a wide-mouthed, vulgar grin, and shook his head above his dirty collar. Jabez thought he had never seen his brother look more unprepossessing, more hopelessly, ingrainedly *common*. It gave him a gleam of satisfaction at the moment, to recall that, although sons of one father, the two had had a different mother.

"Don't you think it, Jabez," proceeded the speaker, still shaking his bullet head derisively. "It's not to be done. Why, your very name betrays you, man. It's not a gentlefolks' name. We're plain working-men, you and I; and there's no making a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

("Certainly it would be difficult to make a silk purse out of you!" reflected Jabez.) But

aloud he merely replied, with a certain doggedness inherited possibly from the working-man's strain, whose existence on one side of the house could not be denied : " Whatever *is* to be done, I mean to do. I have no desire to assume anything to which I am not entitled. You may choose to impute to me motives and ambitions which your own brain has conjured up ; but I deny—Amos, I emphatically deny that they have anything to do with my present course of action. I repudiate them, once for all, and altogether."

" You won't deny that you mean to set up for a gentleman ? "

" I do not mean to ' set up ' for anything. I am a gentleman."

" You a gentleman ! You are no better than the rest of us, and we ——"

" We have never seen alike on this point, and there is nothing to be gained by discussing it. It is your opinion that a man ought to stick to the line of life to which he has been born."

" Aye, it is. What have you to say against that ? *I'm* not ashamed of my line of life."

" I have to say that if it does not suit his tastes and inclinations, and if he has the means of getting away from it, the sooner he does

so the better. It is no question of being 'ashamed' of it."

"You'll never get away; you'll only make a fool of yourself."

Jabez was silent.

"If you must needs be too grand for business, and too idle for honest work, what was to hinder your keeping to your old neighbourhood and your old friends, at any rate?" pursued the elder Mr. Drutt, twirling a penknife sullenly between his fingers—he had been paring his nails previously, a habit particularly offensive to his brother. "You could have picked up a big house cheap somewhere in these parts."

"I have no wish to pick up a house cheap."

"Humph! You did not give much for Old Cary Hall. You got it a bargain—if it is anything like what you say."

"I gave a fair price. The place is old, and in need of repair. I shall have to spend a large sum upon it, making it habitable."

"Aye, an old moth-eaten, rat-eaten den, I'll be bound."

"It is a fine old mansion, perfectly sound, and suits me in all respects. I prefer a house of the kind to a brand-new villa." He paused, then resumed with animation: "Although I come of a plain stock, and on *one* side"—

significantly—"have certainly no forbears to boast of, I can appreciate beauty and grandeur as well as the first nobleman of the land."

"Much some of them care for it! Give them racehorses and blacklegs ——" But Jabez bore down the interruption.

"Hear me for once, Amos; and I shall not trouble you with my views and feelings a second time. You may say what you will of me—misinterpret and misjudge me, if so you choose, to others—but you shall not be able to do so to yourself. In leaving business and shaking off the dust of the warehouse from my feet, I am simply carrying into effect the purpose of a lifetime. From my earliest days, ever since I can remember, it has been my dream to live as my mother told me her people lived. You never would listen—I do not know if she ever asked you to listen—but to me it was like the story of another world. Stop a bit; hear me out," as there was an impatient movement. "Possibly *that* lay at the root of the matter, possibly not; but at any rate, even as a boy I vowed that if the way should ever be open for me to live in the real, free, open country, far from towns and turmoil, far from the struggling, jostling, elbow-shoving uproar of Manchester, I would do it, come what might. Long before this I hoped

that time had come ; but there was always something or other to stop it ——”

“ You had not made enough money ; that was what stopped it.”

“ Not altogether. Of course to live in the way I aim at did—does require a good deal of money ; but I could have been content with less. I did not need two hundred thousand to free me from the chain ;” he paused.

“ Certes, it seems a large amount,” said Amos dryly.

“ It was on my mother’s account, as I think you know, Amos.”

It was now Amos’s turn to be silent ; he did know.

He made an effort to recover himself, however. “ You did your duty by the old lady, I admit.” He nodded in a more cordial manner than he had yet manifested. “ You were a good chap as far as she was concerned. But then, as I said, if it were for her sake you remained here, what was to hinder your transferring her to a place in the neighbourhood ? They were to be had by the dozen.”

“ She was content with Brookfield ; she was quite happy there.”

“ And what ails *you* at Brookfield ? As pretty a spot as you can find, if trees and fields and that sort of thing are what you want.”

Jabez shook his head in a slow smile. It would not be possible to make his half-brother understand what he wanted. How could that dull, mechanical, routine-loving earthworm, whose thoughts revolved round and round in one narrow groove from day to day, who was not only glued to his groove, but gloried in it—how was he ever to be made to lift up his eyes and behold the world afar? Amos Druitt would have told you that he did behold it—with scorn. What more was to be said?

The younger brother made, however, one final effort. "I see it is no use trying to explain," he said; "we never have been in sympathy, you and I."

"Oh, I don't know; we have hit it off pretty well; rubbed along as others do, I fancy. Don't you go away with a grudge against me and the old place."

"No, indeed, Amos. Glad to hear you say so, Amos. And I hope and trust you also bear no grudge."

Simultaneously, each held out an honest hand, and perhaps at this moment the brothers felt more kindly towards each other than they had ever done before.

They had never suited; but, on the other hand, they had never quarrelled. If there had been no particular affection between them, there

had been a perfectly good understanding, and in all matters of business absolute unanimity.

That was to say, Amos had taken the lead, and Jabez with entire good faith had been content to follow blindfold.

So that all went smoothly in the office ; and, the office being the very marrow of the elder Mr. Druitt's bones, he could pass over with easy contempt his brother's peculiarities in other quarters. It was his principle—the home-brewed, hard-and-fast principle of the north of England working race—to live and let live ; and it is due to him to add that as his sturdy, independent mind could ill have brooked interference from others, so was he rigid in abstaining from it on his own part. Jabez might do what he liked, run amuck among his fads and fancies as he chose, so long as he confined them to the domestic circle ; all the elder brother did was to laugh his noisy laugh, or gibe in terms not the most refined, when anything new either in his brother's home or habits struck him as food for merriment.

But that Jabez on the death of his sole remaining parent should quietly set about disposing of his pretty house, with its well-laid-out grounds and gardens, and should announce his prospective retirement from the firm, with the intention of quitting also the neighbourhood,

was too much. Nothing could have upset Mr. Amos Druitt's equilibrium more thoroughly.

He had been accustomed to Jabez from his youth up; had morning by morning nodded a greeting as he went to his desk, while Jabez went to his; had consulted him—to be exact, had announced to him the result of his own inward consultations—on every business point since the deeds of partnership were signed twenty years before; and had never had what he himself would have termed a “row” over any single transaction.

He could never hope to have another partner so docile. Indeed, he would never take another partner; rather a hundred times would he work by himself in the future, than run the risk of being fretted by questions, shackled by doubts, and victimised by “I told you so's” if things went wrong.

Habituated so long to having a free hand, he could not now begin to step in double harness.

It was this conviction on the elder Mr. Druitt's part which ~~was the~~ ^{was the} ~~defection~~ ^{defection} of Jabez so important at this ~~moment~~ ^{moment}. Often as it had been hinted at in ~~other~~ ^{other} times, he had looked upon it as a mere chimera; while of recent years so tongue-tied had his brother been by filial duty that the very remembrance had died out.

Now, when the blow fell—to be historically correct, the blow had fallen a month before, but the wound was as fresh as ever—he felt himself to be a deeply-injured personage; and although the matter was by mutual consent avoided in discussion until avoidance was no longer possible, it was scarcely ever absent from his thoughts.

To have to shape out a new rut in his well-beaten track at his age, and with his reluctance to approach the untried in any shape! It was horrible! It was cruel!

He brooded over it in secret, and stormed about it in conjugal privacy. To no one else than the wife of his bosom could the magnitude of his loss be confided; it would never do to have people whispering and conjecturing, as though it were the reduced capital of the firm which was the bother; but Mrs. Amos (as we shall call her for lucidity's sake in these pages), who held fast by her husband in all things, so long as she was kept in luxury, allowed to roll in her carriage, give big dinners, and patronise her acquaintances, was not stinted in her sympathy or reprobation. Her husband had that comfort.

“If the stupid owl would only come up three days a week—three? two—*one* would be enough, so long as he were seen about the place

at all," cried he at last; "just come for an hour on a Monday, or a Friday, and keep it dark that he was frittering away his money elsewhere! But no, he must needs let all the world into the secret. I shouldn't have cared if he bought Windsor Castle, as long as it were within an hour's rail of Manchester, and he could still be seen upon the line going up and down. And he is as stubborn as a mule—he who was always easy enough to manage in the office! I will say that for Jabez, no fellow could have been pleasanter to work with. Never a word was there between us. But it seems he has had this maggot in his head all the time. His mother, like a goose, laid it there; and no doubt all the time the two have been living alone together, since the pater and the sisters died, they have been fostering and cockering it. You know how niffy-naffy he is in his dress——"

"My word, Amos! I wish you were the same! If it were only his dress, I should not complain," cried Mrs. Amos, with a toss of her head. She was a dressy person herself, fond of gay colours, rustling gowns, and new bonnets; she had never yet learnt to submit with patience to her husband's creased coat-tails and ill-tied neck-cloths.

"I suppose he will marry now," cogitated

she, seeing that her implied challenge produced no effect.

"Marry a duchess. There are plenty to be had." Mr. Druitt grimly smiled. "There are all kinds of scampering dowagers on the field, who would snap at two hundred thousand pounds. That's what Jabez takes out of the business, confound him! No credit to him, either. Part of it made by our father, part by me; what has *he* done to collar a lump sum like that?"

"You may say so indeed. Is it so much, really? Why, then, you must have a good deal more, Amos?" quoth the lady shrewdly; and the idea putting her in a good humour, she proceeded in brisk conversational accents: "I suppose you came in for Sam's share between you, as well as the girls' that died. You and Jabez being the only two to live out of the whole set, you reaped the benefit."

"Humph!" said Mr. Druitt, looking at her. He had one soft—fairly soft—spot in his heart. He had a vein of family affection. "They might have lived for me," he said gruffly; "I would as soon have had them as their money;"—which was a good deal for Amos Druitt to say.

CHAPTER XVII.

"EVERY MAN TO HIS TASTE."

LET us, however, return from this digression to the conclusion of the brothers' interview.

We left the two shaking hands over the declaration that no grudge was to be borne by either because of the rupture which was to sever their fortunes henceforth ; and this spontaneous action, springing as it did from unsophisticated natures, to whom every species of pretence was an abomination, and even the display of genuine emotion distasteful, went far to establish a better feeling at the close of the discussion than had seemed possible at its commencement.

Also Jabez Druitt at last obtained a hearing.

"Do me the justice, Amos," he pleaded, "to believe that it is not a wretched, foolish, futile ambition to pass myself off for anything I am not, to intrude into a sphere above me, which prompts me to lead the life I long for. If you could only see into my heart, you would never charge me with *that* again. I am not, as you

rightly say, born to a certain position, and it is quite possible that I may not be accepted by the people I am going among."

Amos opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it.

"I repeat, it is quite possible," said his brother quickly. "They, like you, may see in my buying Sir Philip Goffe's estate only a vulgar desire to push my way up, as so many others of our kind—yes, of our kind—are doing. Since you, my own brother, don't know me better after all these years, I suppose"—an involuntary sighed escaped—"strangers are pretty sure to be of your opinion."

"Well, well; of course I—I didn't mean *all* I said, Jay. Come to think of it, you have always been a bit cracked on the subject. I—I daresay you'll get along all right," Amos said with a gulp.

"If I do not, I must make a shift not to mind it. If they will not admit me to their houses and their society, I must do without it. But the real things I seek to obtain from a free open-air life will not disappoint me—for they cannot. I want to see the sun rise day after day on pasture land and woodland, green meadows and winding streams. I want to see him shine in his strength on rustic village and hamlet, church spire and homely farmyard. I

want to see him sink to rest at night over far distant horizons of undulating plains and forests. These sights I never see here"—slowly and emphatically. "I am shut up within walls—often these four walls—at any rate, walls of some sort—all through the best hours of the day; and that in spring and summer, as well as in autumn and winter. I am bending over papers and ledgers, my eyes nailed to the desk, when I might be bursting away over hillside and down, drinking in the music of rejoicing nature, breathing the odours of earth and sea. The day is done ere I set foot outside during many months of the year. When I go home it is pretty and pleasant; my garden blooms and the birds sing; but it is so small, and so measured round. Every square foot is of value. I want to go where there is space; where there is silence; where there is not always in the distance that great ceaseless hum. It irks me never to be out of hearing of hurrying steps and rattling wheels. I do not desire to go away from England—though the cry is that we are crowded everywhere in this little island; but that is a mis-statement; there are beautiful unworn counties still, especially in the south; and so to the south I go. Last month, after my mother was taken, I went to London, as you know, and saw an agent ——"

"Ah, you heard of the place then?"

"And saw it. I went down with an order to survey the house and estate generally; while yet it appeared to be Sir Philip's desire, equally with my own, to keep the fact of its being for sale from being known. He was particularly anxious that the whole transaction should be completed before any word of it leaked out. Well, I went down as I say; and it appeared to me that if ever any place were to fulfil the dream of my youth, I had found the place."

"Humph! It's a monstrous big house, Jabez."

"It is. Rather big. But I can keep a good number of servants; and, after all, there are not so many rooms. They are large, but there are fewer than one would imagine from the outside. And I could hardly hope to find the true old-world flavour in a house of small dimensions. The large chimney-corners, for instance; the thick walls and deep-set windows; the high-arched roof ——"

"All very fine, but I hate 'em. Nasty, cobwebby places. However, every man to his taste, and if it be yours to grovel among rats and spiders and dry rot, you have a right to indulge it, I suppose. Give me a decent bed, and a decent table; clean carpets and curtains. None of your high-falutin' tantrums in the

furniture line. I suppose there is a lot of dingy oak and carving, and floors that you fall down upon, eh?"

"There is. The polished floors took my fancy as much as anything; but of course I shall put down some Turkey rugs."

"Cover 'em up from top to toe, if you take *my* advice. Oh, that doesn't suit you?" catching the other's smile. "Well, it's none of my business. Are you going to paint and paper?" demanded he next, for apart from office matters there did not exist a more inquisitive man than Mr. Amos Druitt, and one of his favourite recreations was to go over an empty house. Into the very scullery would he spy.

"Until I have been down and seen the place again, I hardly know to what extent it requires re-papering. Paint I certainly must." Then a sudden thought occurred to the speaker. "Come down to Somersetshire with me, Amos, and have a look at Old Cary Hall for yourself."

"*I?* Good Lord, no! What should I go for?" But Amos looked, in a sneaking, doubtful fashion, pleased. "What good should I be?" repeated he. "Only set you against your bargain, maybe; and you know my motto, 'It's no use crying over spilt milk'. When a thing is done ——"

"Oh, I'm not afraid of repenting," said Jabez cheerfully. "I have known for so long exactly what I want, and have taken all the drawbacks to a plan of the kind so thoroughly into consideration, that it is not the smoky fireplaces and draughty staircases of Old Cary Hall I am afraid of. *That* will be all right. Come along with me on Tuesday, Amos?"

"On Tuesday? Are you going on Tuesday?"

"Only for a couple of nights. I told you I was leaving"—an involuntary hesitation—"was leaving off to-day, you remember; and you thought it a good time."

"Oh, it's a good time enough. Tuesday?" He stroked his chin and clawed his lips meditatively. "You would not be seeing anybody, or wanting to drag me into other houses?" He threw out a sharp, suspicious glance. "'Tis a fool's errand, but still—if I did make up my mind to pack up a toothbrush and go with you, just to see the sort of thing you have let yourself in for ——"

"That's right; you come," said Jabez, with real gratification; for, after all, he was about to break the ties of half a lifetime, and beneath all their differences of disposition, character, and taste, there lurked a certain respect for his elder brother's judgment, and a desire to main-

tain a place in his goodwill, which made the concession welcome—nay, flattering.

He would not have cared, certainly would not have cared, to introduce Amos—Amos, with his ill-cut hair, ill-shaven face, hulking figure and tobacco-stained hands—as his nearest relation, on taking up residence in his new abode ; but for a mere flying visit of inspection he would be an adjunct not to be despised.

For one thing, Amos would undoubtedly nose out, in his own phraseology, every weak point in the purchase. Not a leaky pipe nor worn-out joint would escape him. He would, bulk and all, hoist himself on to the roof somehow, and pounce upon gutter or crevice that required new leading and soldering. Drains he would gloat over.

All these homely and most necessary details were not in Jabez's line. He recognised their importance, but was secretly conscious that he should, left to himself, be at the mercy of hirelings whose integrity he could not guarantee, however long might be their bills.

By the anticipatory gleam which now stole over the countenance of his brother he guessed what was passing in Amos's mind, and participated in the feeling.

"You see, you will be so useful to me," said he cheerfully. "You know such a lot about a

house ; everything in yours is so perfect—I mean"—(stammering, for "perfect" was the last word he would have applied to the sumptuous villa with its florid decorations, from any point of view but that uppermost in his thoughts at the moment)—"your—your iron-work, masonry, drainage ——"

"See to them all myself, my boy. Never trust an outsider. You remember how I nosed out that leak in your sewer that none of you would believe in, till I proved it to you? And my man Brierly said there wasn't one in a thousand would have put his finger on the spot as I did! I guess if I *do* go with you, Jabez, your plumbers and fitters down there won't bless me. I'll make them stir their stumps."

"There will be a good deal to be done," said Jabez confidentially. "I am quite prepared for that. I have put aside the price of Brookfield, and the cows and horses—everything, in short—to be laid out on the house alone. What fell in to me at my mother's death covered the purchase—more than covered it; there were a few hundreds over; so that I have the two hundred thousand odd I take out of the business, as capital from which to draw my income. It ought to bring me in from eight to nine thousand a year to begin

with ; and as I shall not, of course, live up to this—at any rate at first—the income will be on an increasing scale. I shall be able to do all that is necessary to Old Cary Hall, and the estate generally, without stint of means ; and afterwards pursue the life I desire to lead, without any scruples as to its necessitating in itself outlay greater than I can afford.”

“No doubt.”

But though the other's tone was dry and slightly sarcastic, it was not belligerent, as hitherto. Two softening influences had been at work.

First, Mr. Druitt was more pleased than he would have owned to any one with his brother's invitation ; secondly, he longed to probe and point his finger at the vile drainage of Old Cary Hall.

He knew what it would be. Puffs of typhoid at every grating. A gutter stream at the back door.

His big, thick nose swelled in anticipation.

Accordingly he puffed and blew, put out his lips, rolled his chin, and creased his collar more badly than before, the while he cast about in his mind how to arrange matters for the three days' absence ; and as by this time the dissolution of partnership had actually taken place, and the interview above recorded was merely

one of several relating to the same subject, there was nothing left to bring forward and form a new bone of contention.

"All right for Tuesday, old fellow."

It was the elder's voice which called out from behind a huge mahogany bureau, as the younger presently put on his greatcoat, took up his hat and stick, and turned his back upon the familiar desk—for ever.

It was Saturday ; he would not come up on Monday. But he said nothing about it to Amos, and Amos only showed that he knew by his "All right for Tuesday". It was the brothers' way.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SIR PHILIP'S MEDITATIONS.

"THEY tell me two of the most *extraordinary*-looking men have been down to see it," said Lady Tilbury, referring to Old Cary Hall, the sale of which was now known to all, and formed the chief topic of conversation in the neighbourhood.

Sir Philip, when confiding it to her sympathetic ear a month before, had begged for a week's grace before having the news bruited abroad ; and this had been religiously observed. More, the two who felt themselves to be his friends—who were certainly his nephew's friends above all others—told each other that when the affair was public property it would be time enough to admit that they had possessed the secret as a secret.

But they had had to keep their own counsel longer than was to have been expected. Mr. Jabez Druitt had not only readily granted Sir Philip's request of the same nature, but with a delicacy of feeling for which he was given no

credit then or thereafter by the cynical baronet, suffered a considerable time to elapse before taking any steps towards entering upon possession of his newly-acquired territory.

Sir Philip, with the Channel between him and all he had lost, with no further call upon his emotions, and with an easier mind than he had known for many a long day, speedily discovered that the throes he had endured in parting with his ancient acres had more of sentiment in them than anything else.

He had suffered no real loss—or so he told himself. Nothing had disappeared from his life—except debts.

He could go on living as he had done before ; no, hang it ! a great deal better than he had done before ; and in truth it came to this at last, that he only wondered, wondered aloud and openly, how he had been so infatuated as to hang on so long to a mere foible—an obsolete, expensive prejudice.

He had desired his man of business to make no mention of Old Cary Hall or anything connected with it, once the requisite papers were signed, and the change of owners effected. He did not care to know what Mr. Druitt proposed to do with it ; whether he meant to live in it, let it, or raze it to the ground. He never wished to hear Mr. Druitt's name.

But perhaps, even when thus peremptory, the writer scarcely intended his prohibition to be adhered to with rigid fidelity ; and it is certain that by the end of a week he began to repent having issued it.

What the deuce was Jabez doing ?

The name "Jabez" tickled Sir Philip's fancy, and he now never spoke nor thought of Mr. Druitt by any other cognomen. Jabez ? He wondered what Jabez was like ? How Jabez would go down among the Somersetshire folk ? What would be said of himself for selling his patrimony to a—Jabez ?

"Let them say what they like ! Let them be as wild as they please !" quoth he, chuckling. "I got my price ; and what the dickens is it to me who picks up my old shoes ? I couldn't keep them on my feet ; if Jabez can, Jabez is welcome. I daresay Jabez is a very decent fellow," proceeded Sir Philip complacently. "If that ass of a Worthington had not pestered me with his praises, dinning his 'Mr. Druitt' here and 'Mr. Druitt' there into my ears till they were sick of the sound, I—'pon my word, I shouldn't have minded showing him a little civility. Might have dined him at my club—dined him with his own money," chuckling anew at the conceit ; "and drunk good luck to our bargain in a bottle of fizz. I almost wish I had. Then

I should at least have known what sort of a looking man I have sent down among the clodhoppers. Faith, they'll not make it a bed of roses for him if he's a bounder. His very name ——" Sir Philip paused, pursed up his lips, and shook his head. "Won't do, Jabez. I'm sorry for you, Jabez; but if you are to have any peace of mind in Old Cary Hall, any comfortable seat under the mahogany of the good folk down there, you must get rid of that name somehow—Mr. Jabez Druitt."

Curiosity at length was too much for pride; the exile felt that he *must* know what the supplanter was about. Had he not himself said that the supplanter might be a decent fellow? Why, then, had he made such a fuss about holding him at arm's length? It was not as though Jabez had made any attempt to break through the guard: Jabez had done nothing of the kind; had not suggested a single meeting; had not even addressed him a letter.

"It was all that confounded sentimentality," mused Sir Philip at last. "I have always had too much of it, bother it! Now I have cut my own throat, for the fact is I'd give anything to know what Jabez is doing to the old place, and what people are saying about Jabez. What they are saying about *me*"—arching his eyebrows—"I think I can do without hearing."

A pause. "I am catching it pretty hot, I expect." Another pause. "They don't know."

After a full minute's silent musing, Sir Philip repeated aloud, slowly, and with withering emphasis: "They—*don't—know*".

Long years of shifts and straits, humiliating experiences, paltry evasions, petty dishonesties, (yes, it had come to that), went to make up the bitterness of that "*They—don't—know*".

There were scenes upon which the wanderer loathed to cast even the eye of solitude; which had flushed his face at the time, but had been got through with an inward oath or two, and got over the sooner because others of a similar sort loomed on ahead.

His whole life had consisted, as it were, in leaping from rock to rock.

When Mr. Minching paid his rent, and for a brief period thereafter, the unfortunate Sir Philip felt the rock beneath him—(and to his credit be it added, he invariably paid his nephew's allowance ere the rock tottered, so that Reggie had no idea on what a thread it hung, nor what a slice it made in the sender's slender finances); but before another and smaller sum became due, six months later, the poor baronet would generally be in a bad way. Nor would the annual eighty to ninety pounds which came in then, so effectually relieve the exchequer as to make him ever feel

flush again until September came round ; since, although now and again an unexpected small sum did make its appearance—a farmer would pay his rent, without the rents being all swallowed up in rebuilding or repairing—there was no dependence to be placed on such stray subsidies. They were stepping-stones—hardly rocks ; he had but two veritable rocks to vibrate between.

Reggie, leading a jolly life among his comrades—Reggie, with his grievances, which were purely imaginary, and merely retained by him as a useful species of paraphernalia—had no idea of the real wretchedness of such a life.

He took it that his uncle was as light-hearted, easy-going and easily satisfied as himself. It was rough on Sir Philip, he reflected, not to be able to live at his own place ; but lots of other proprietors were as badly off ; and very likely the tide would turn one of these days.

It did not strike him that a tide which has been on the ebb for forty years and more is apt to wear out the patience of middle life, which sees old age drawing on. Sir Philip was nearer sixty than fifty, and there is a vast difference between the hopefulness of fifty-five and twenty-five.

When the nephew heard, (it dropped out casually, for he had no thought of inquiring),

that his uncle had been seen of late at the gaming-table, and that the person who saw him fancied his face did not look like that of a winner, Reggie took the incident philosophically. He supposed there was nothing else to do at a foreign watering-place, and he hoped Sir Philip sometimes had luck, if not always. Sir Philip probably knew how much he was good for, and would not plunge beyond his depth. With a wonderful unanimity, all who knew Sir Philip Goffe concurred in supposing he knew his own business—all, at any rate, who did not come into personal contact with him. He had at least this virtue, he kept his curtain drawn.

So that surprise was possibly the predominant feeling of Sir Philip's heir when, in the shadowy depths of the old hall, the former for one brief moment tore aside the veil, and laid bare in all its hideousness his vagrant, shabby existence.

Was it possible—was it *possible*—that this miserable tale of mean poverty could have for its central figure the relation of whom Reggie had always been so proud? *Could* it refer to the head of his house, the representative of his long race?

In the first confused agitation of endeavouring to grasp a *bouleversement* so complete, pity and grief struggled for the mastery in his breast, and he had regarded the speaker with a tender-

ness which emboldened Sir Philip greatly. Reggie, good boy, would not blame him for what was to follow.

But ere the whole truth was out in its black entirety, the young soldier had so far recovered himself as to recall those hints of Monte Carlo which had meant nothing to him when given, but which stood out sharply in the gloom of the betrayed mansion. *It* had been the penalty—the sacrifice which had gone to appease the gods of the red-and-black table. His cheeks took a darker hue ; his brow contracted.

Seeing this, Sir Philip had quickly played his trump card ; not without result.

To be transferred to a crack cavalry regiment, to have his allowance made adequate thereto, and, above all, to have the enigma solved which had tortured his hour of darkness—solved on the instant—was certainly, yes, it was certainly a mitigation of affliction.

Reluctantly, he could not but own as much ; and though Sir Philip, who had fallen from his pedestal, was not to be let down too easily, Sir Philip could perceive that the worst was past.

Matters had reached this stage when we found the two in gloomy confab, and though neither could be entirely open and unrestrained throughout their subsequent interview, the

tension relaxed as time passed, and with the parting scene some renewal of better feeling took place.

“Good-bye, my boy. God bless you.”

“Good-bye, sir. You’ll look me up as you said?”

Then the two shook hands, and, albeit there was nothing tender nor pathetic in such a farewell, each was glad afterwards to remember that Sir Philip had accompanied his nephew on board, and hung on his arm rather wistfully to the last.

But, the scene over, both were secretly relieved to have done with it—and with each other.

CHAPTER XIX.

"JABEZ MUST BE A COOL HAND."

LET us now return to Lady Tilbury and her two "extraordinary-looking" men.

They were, of course, the two Mr. Druitts ; but it was hardly fair of her ladyship to bracket them in one emphasis, since there was in reality nothing either extraordinary or unattractive in the appearance of Mr. Jabez Druitt.

True, he had not shaken off his office clothes yet, and to these Somersetshire eyes were unaccustomed ; but had he been seen at the first, as he was afterwards, in the excellent country suits designed for him by the Bond Street tailor of whose existence Amos was unaware, it would have been at once perceived that his exterior was such as to merit approval rather than animadversion.

He had not the figure of a young man, but it was a good figure nevertheless. Mrs. Amos Druitt, when defending her cook from peevishness on the part of a pampered master, was wont to cry out that Amos would do well to imitate

his younger brother's plainer mode of life, and hold up Jabez as a proof that it was not sedentary habits which made a man stout. Jabez was as slim as a man in middle life need wish to be.

The younger Mr. Druitt had also "kept his hair," as the saying is, and it was nice, crisp, dark hair, with no more than a mere sprinkling of grey in it; while he had a perfectly smooth, healthy, fresh-coloured face, surmounted by the grey eyes which had been inherited from his mother, and were apt at times to look as soft and dreamy as her own.

"Where are your eyes?" had been a not infrequent demand on the part of Amos in days past, his own never being anywhere but in their right place—*i.e.*, fixed on the object in front. "Where are your eyes?" he would cry ironically, Jabez having failed to perceive the artfulness or underhandedness which to him was so palpable.

Jabez, not being on the look-out for these, often missed them; Amos, on the other hand, occasionally saw what did not exist. In a word, the elder brother's was the cleverer, bolder, and more self-reliant nature, but the younger's—nay, we will let the younger's speak for itself.

"Seems to me you'd have been lost without me, Jay."

The two had taken up their quarters for the night at the inn frequented by Mr. Minching

and his party, and were comfortably discussing matters after what Amos was pleased to term a very decent dinner.

"It's some comfort to my mind that I have done you a turn by coming down here," proceeded he, hooking a chair towards him with his toe, and then resting both legs upon it. "Anyhow, you'll be properly drained and guttered. And if you have any reason to suspect them of scamp work, you send to me," concluded he, with a smile which the office would have known how to interpret.

"You are very good to say so. Indeed, I appreciate your services thoroughly. You tackled them in splendid style," replied Jabez, adverting to the numerous masons, plumbers, and carpenters who had been given their orders that day. "And you explained everything so fully to me also, Amos, that I—ahem—I really think you will not need to be troubled to come again—at any rate, for some time. When everything is complete, I hope ——"

"Oh, we'll take a week-end presently, the missis and I, and see how you get on. Mind you, I'm not budging one inch from my opinion; and my opinion is that for a man to alter his ways and habits at your time of life is sheer foolishness." (" 'Twould be the death of me," in parenthesis.) "But since you are set on doing

it—had done it without saying ‘By your leave’ to anybody—well, Amos Druitt is not the man to sulk in a corner and cry: ‘Lie on the bed you’ve made, if it’s all stinging-nettles!’”

“You made a terrific raid upon those nettles in the back-yard to-day,” laughed Jabez, who was in excellent spirits, pleased with all he had done and seen, and really grateful for his brother’s very substantial aid.

“Good Lord! Did you ever see their like?” Amos joined in the laugh. “Nettles? I felt as if I had never set eyes upon nettles in my life before! A perfect nettle plantation. A jungle. And I say, don’t forget to watch that fellow who contracted for the leadwork, Jay. Old lead is worth a lot. Let him see you on the watch; let him find you are up to it all.”

“I expect what you said will be enough. They were all coming to *you* and listening to *you* at the end. I must not let out that there will be only me in the future,” shaking his head.

“Aye, to be sure; if they find out you’re the boss—but don’t you be overcrowded. Don’t let them think they can gammon you. Stick up to ’em; and if there’s anything you are in a quandary about, drop me a line. I won’t say I’ll *come*, for business is business, and I shall have to stick closer than ever to it now you

are gone, but I'll write. I'll send a stinger of a letter that will show them you've some one behind you who is a match for any one of the lot, or all put together. I've done what I can for you, Jay, and you must stand on your own feet now;" and Mr. Amos Druitt kicked aside the chair in front of him and rolled off to bed.

Jabez remained where he was, and long after the house was quiet he still sat gazing into the fire, seeing in its glowing embers, as they sank one by one, visions of the life before him—visions destined to be fulfilled in a manner he little dreamt of, and that at no very distant period of time.

"Nothing been heard of him! Not taken possession yet!" cried Sir Philip, having elicited as much in reply to the inquiries wrung out of him at last. "What a confoundedly strange thing! Why, I made sure Jabez would be into it before I was well out of it! I begged for a week's delay to let Reggie get clear off, and myself too; but, hang it all! Jabez must be a cool hand. Pays his money, and doesn't trouble himself to pick up his toy!"

He felt in a manner affronted; as though a slight had been put upon the home of his ancestors. For a whole day and night he thought of nothing else; and then, just as he

was wondering whether he should ever demean himself to inquire again, the post brought a second letter from Mr. Worthington, containing enough to satisfy his curiosity in all conscience. When he read that since penning the previous epistle the lawyer had learnt that a whole army of workmen had entered into possession of Old Cary Hall; that the ancient structure itself was being overhauled from tower to basement; that a landscape gardener with his myrmidons was at work on terraced lawn and gravel-path; that the stables were being newly roofed and glazed; and that the whole domain rang with the sounds of hammering and scraping—when he read this, poor Sir Philip, once more stung to the quick, in a frenzy of passion tore the letter in a hundred pieces, cursed alike Worthington who had written it and himself who had asked for it, and just stopped short of cursing Mr. Jabez Druitt, who was the real offender, as he—took a fresh cigar out of his case.

Sir Philip was a gentleman; he looked at his cigar curiously. "I used to smoke such vile things," he murmured half aloud; then after a few puffs, "Owe this cigar to Jabez," said he quite complacently.

CHAPTER XX.

"DIDN'T SIR THOMAS TELL ME TO BE CAREFUL?"

"WHAT do you say, Iva? Oh, that 'One of them was better than the other'. But then, we may be sure it is 'the other' we shall have," said Lady Tilbury, giving her muff a little shake of conviction. "It always is, you know. And where did you see them, Iva? Passing through the village? Oh, turning out of the avenue. Well, Sophy Lossett told me they were extraordinary-looking men, and *she* saw them several times. Sophy always sees everybody. I cannot imagine how she does it."

"My dear Lady Tilbury"—it was the dean's wife who spoke—"there are people who simply spend their days in busying themselves with their neighbours' affairs. They have none of their own. If Miss Lossett would engage in some Christian work ——"

"Oh, well, she's a good daughter to her old father;" Lady Tilbury was always on the lenient side; "and Sophy does visit the cottages. But, you see, that can't fill up all her

time: and after all, old maids must have their gossip. For my part, I own I look to the Lossetts for the news of the countryside; when I see either of them coming up our way, I know I am in for a regular budget."

"I have no time for gossip;" but the austere accents relaxed as Mrs. Chancellor regarded the bright face in front of her, and recollected what Lady Tilbury had had "time for" once. "Of course, it is a great deal to you who you are to have for a neighbour," graciously conceded she. "Old Cary Hall being so very close at hand, and the two houses being in a manner isolated by their own extensive surroundings, I sincerely hope you will be able to admit Mr. Druitt to Tilbury Court. There is no Mrs. Druitt, you say?"

"Not a trace of her. So what the man can want with that huge house—but of course he may have relations. To tell the honest truth, I am expiring with curiosity to see the relations. I hope a whole gang of them will come down. It would be so very amusing."

"Amusing. My dear Lady Tilbury!"

"Amusing! Mother!"

For once the correct, conventional dean's wife and the impulsive Irish girl were in accord; Mrs. Chancellor from one point of view, and

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Iva Kildare from another, were almost equally horrified by the gay remark.

"Oh, yes; vastly amusing!" nodded Lady Tilbury merrily. "The greatest fun in the world. Iva looks black at me because—of course I am as sorry as she that Sir Philip Goffe had to sell, and that poor dear Reggie," (Iva groaned within herself), "whom we were all so fond of, will never come in for the old place now. But then, he never could have lived at it," proceeded she, in clear accents; "it would just have been Sir Philip over again. So, much as we miss Reggie," ("Oh, do take care!" another inward objurgation from Iva; the photograph scene had taken place within the very house where now her heedless parent ran on), "I daresay it is all for the best," summed up the speaker, comfortably beaming over her muff, as though totally unaware of the expressions on the different faces.

No one suspected for a moment that beneath that innocent babble there was a purpose. Least of all did Iva, on tenter-hooks lest her mother should say too much or too little—should be too affectionate towards the absentee, or too pointedly avoid his name—least of all did she give the speaker credit for the wisdom beneath the mask.

But lest our readers should miss it also—as

they certainly would had they sat by in the dean's drawing-room, and witnessed the nonchalance with which Lady Tilbury acquitted herself of her mission—we may just inform them that no word of the above but had been carefully studied and mentally rehearsed; indeed, that the present expedition had been expressly undertaken for the purpose of carrying it out.

Not owing Mrs. Chancellor a call, she had made an excuse for one. Something had reached her ears which had not reached Iva's, and this was the result.

“Poor darling! So that was at the bottom of the sulky fit—and no wonder!” the sympathetic creature had cried in community with herself. “It has been set a-going that she and Reggie are sweethearts—set a-going before she knew it herself, and before ever a word had been spoken! Musha! that was what I was afraid of. I saw it coming. And she won't speak of it—not even to me. It's just deep down in her own heart, where she hides it close, close, as I did once, pretending to myself that I no more cared for Jack Kildare than the post by the garden gate”—the tender ruminations flowing freely—“but oh, my poor Iva, *your* Jack is not for you!”—the widow would sigh and wipe her eyes, full of love and pity. “Sure he's a fine boy, and I would have welcomed

him as a son—ah, what's that I'm saying? Didn't Sir Thomas tell me to be careful, and not have him so much about when the girls grew up? And didn't I wonder what was to be done when I saw as plain as eyes could see that he and Iva were growing towards each other? Wasn't I fretting myself about it, for, try as we might, it was just impossible to keep Reggie off, the darling? There was *that* about him—sure, now, I'm an old fool!" and suddenly Lady Tilbury drew herself together, and shook off the melting mood. "It's no use, I tell you, no use whatever," cried she, angrily apostrophising herself, "sitting there, whining and weeping! Is it Iva's mother you are, and can't do better for her than this? Much she'll have to thank you for, if in her bad hour you let them point the finger at her!" Lady Tilbury rose and rang the bell. Iva need not have been afraid of what her mother would say at the Deanery.

"Dear me! There could not have been anything *really* between those two!" exclaimed Esther Chancellor, as the carriage rolled away from the door. "Of course, they have known each other all their lives, and as he was just going out to India she must have given him her photograph to take with him, and he had not had time to put it elsewhere."

"I thought you said they both looked most dreadfully caught?" asserted her next sister, aggrieved by the collapse of the romance.

"So they did. He in particular. I never saw Reggie Goffe look disconcerted before. Never imagined he could look disconcerted. And it was more than that—it was the terrified glance he threw at Iva! He seemed perfectly aghast; and well he might. Iva's face was a caution! It *was* enough to provoke a girl of Iva's temper to have such a thing happen,—even if there were nothing serious behind. Iva is proud, and she is awfully particular. I never knew a girl so particular. Lady Tilbury is not half so particular as Iva."

"Lady Tilbury is not particular at all."

"And she is so very open. So frank and jolly. I do like Lady Tilbury! Everybody does; even mamma. It was so much better of her to say out that they were fond of Reggie Goffe, and would miss him, than to pretend there was any love affair, when I daresay there was nothing of the kind. Some people like to make out that every man who comes near their daughters falls a victim; that *is* so ridiculous, and it takes nobody in, because directly a man is really in love with a girl it is patent to everybody he meets." And Miss Esther Chancellor, who bade fair to become just such another shin-

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ing light in cathedral circles as her esteemed parent, primmed up her lips, and felt that she had disposed of the subject conclusively.

She did not see Lady Tilbury smile to herself as the carriage drove on.

Iva, however, had a sudden illumination, and a month previously this would have found vent almost before the wheels began to turn. Why not? She and her mother always told each other everything, discussed every turn of events, poured into each other's ears all the trivial by-play, the "He said" and "She said" which go for so much in women's talk; wherefore it would have been the most natural thing in the world to have plunged *in medias res* on the present occasion.

But Iva's lips were glued together.

She wished—she longed to speak; her heart was aching from very loneliness—the loneliness of a long, silent month—and still she could not. It seemed as though she never could.

All had been so strange—and so quick. One day the old pleasant, familiar state of things—Reggie a little dangerous, a little apt to encroach, but on the whole just Reggie, as to whom caution might be spurned and superfluous hints scouted—the next, a lover claiming a lover's privilege on the brink of an eternal separation.

It seemed the flash of a dream, that unreal afternoon in the November gloaming.

First there had been the commonplace meeting in the garden, with spectators standing by, and only a little mutual consciousness on her part and his, not without its charm.

It did not ill become a delinquent to be serious, and keep his eyes averted. There had been the pleasure of punishing him, the pleasure of knowing that he felt his punishment and knew perfectly to what it was due, as he stalked along by Miss St. Leger's side.

Miss St. Leger, cheerfully conversing with so acceptable a beau, might fancy herself in luck; but Iva knew better. She could interpret every lingering movement, every absent-minded halt; and the nervous, artificial laugh, the perfunctory rejoinder, the troubled, oppressed, downcast demeanour, all so unlike the *usual* Reggie—oh, how Ethel St. Leger would have stared if she had known!

To tell the truth frankly, Iva had enjoyed that half-hour.

Then had come the shock, felt to her very heart's foundation.

Not on her account altogether, then, was the altered countenance of her friend—there was this behind.

A rupture of every tie to be made, a whole

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new cast of life to be taken within the space of a few short hours? Who would not have looked thoughtful, overcast—who, at least, that was not brimming with the excitement of anticipation?

And that Reggie was not brimming was very evident. One swift glance he threw at Iva when the news was out, communicated in Sir Philip's thin, tremulous, high-pitched accents—and the glance pierced through her like a knife;—but he had relapsed instantly into his former attitude, and scarcely responded at all to the fresh efforts of Miss St. Leger. Even Ethel had left off bombarding, and taken to playing with Jess the spaniel, ere the house was reached.

And then—how often Iva saw what happened then! The apparently matter-of-course arrangement by which she fell behind, and marshalled her guests in front; her pretext of summoning her sisters, in hopes that Reggie would remain in the hall to meet them, and give her a chance, one chance, of saying a kind word; his resolute grasp upon the moment, and determination to wring from it more than this; the very snapping of the lock in the door of the little room, as it closed behind him and her—all, all were indelibly stamped upon her memory for ever.

In visions of the night she could hear the

choking whisper, hear that she was beloved—yes, that was joy ; but ah, how soon to be followed by the sinking of the heart when, all over, he turned to go ; and yet again, the throb of that one passionate embrace which set its seal upon the whole burning scene, but seemed to steal the poison from it !

How, after this, could Iva speak of Reggie to her mother, or to any one ?

CHAPTER XXI.

"OF COURSE YOU WANT TO HUNT."

It was a sparkling, bright December morning, exactly three years after we last saw our *dramatis personæ*, and we may say in a word that although the period had not been barren of trivial events, episodes, and alterations, in the main its features were unchanged.

Sir Philip Goffe was flourishing, as we left him, on the proceeds of his departed patrimony; Reggie was still with his regiment in India, and had merely quitted one frontier station for another; Lady Tilbury and Iva had returned from autumn visits and a London season, and were settled down at Tilbury Court for the winter; and Mr. Druitt—let us take Mr. Druitt first by the hand.

Bright though the day was, it was a hunting day, and Mr. Druitt, attired in a sober hunting suit, but smart withal, was standing outside his open door, waiting for his horse to be brought round. When the new proprietor of the Goffe estate took up his residence in Somersetshire,

it had been a question whether or no he would ride to hounds ; and no one had pondered the question more anxiously than Mr. Druitt himself. He longed to do so. From his youth he had envied all who could ; but now that the time had come when no bar offered itself to the accomplishment of his desire, he experienced a natural timidity on more grounds than one.

It was not only that he was no longer youthful and supple ; there were other fears at work.

Suppose the Hunt regarded him as an intruder ? Or, while tolerating the intruder for the sake of his subscription, jeered among themselves at his riding ? He knew nothing about horses. Suppose he were badly mounted ?

A dozen minor perplexities had nearly scared him off the idea, but, as luck would have it, Mr. Druitt was at home when the Master called, and the Master had been asked to call by Lady Tilbury.

Although Mrs. Puddington was still alive—still dragging out a fretful existence 'twixt sofa and medicine bottles—Lady Tilbury continued to hold her place in the coarse, blustering squire's regard, and he would take from her what he would not have stood from anybody else—an authoritative hint. Having been desired in very distinct terms to call on Mr. Druitt, he did so.

Then he was glad he had done so. Finally he was d——d glad he had done so. Druitt was a capital fellow. Hang it all, he couldn't help being a *cotton-draper*! And having bought Goffe's rotten old property, and set the poor devil on his legs for once, it was only fair that he should get some good out of his bargain.

Being interpreted, this meant that Mr. Puddington, who was not in the habit of finding himself kindly regarded and deferentially hearkened to anywhere but on the hunting-field, had fairly succumbed to the gentle courtesy of his host.

He had rung the bell and demanded admittance, with his eyes roving hither and thither, spying out the land, the while he wondered what the deuce he was doing there on such an errand. He had entered the great hall with as much vulgar curiosity as to what it would look like, and as resolute an intention of saying whatever he had a mind to on the subject, as ever Amos Druitt had. He had sat down and stared about him, grunting under his breath, and tapping with his boot heels.

'Gad! he had no idea it was so fine a house! Poor Goffe! It was devilish hard on him to have a vile money-grubber — the door opened, and the vile money-grubber entered.

Mr. Puddington was taken by surprise. He had expected a pompous, whiskered, bow-waist-coated magnate, loud and arrogant as himself, in a different line. He had meant to hold his own and out-talk anybody.

Instead he had all the talk to himself. He was listened to with pleased attention; his advice was sought; presently he was confided in. He had never been in such a position before.

And with it all there was no servility on Mr. Druitt's part. Puddington was accustomed to the cringing of a certain class of inferiors, especially on his own ground when talking of "My hunt" and "My hounds," but he was sharp enough to perceive that the deference with which he was now regarded had no end to gain.

"I hardly think I shall hunt, but I shall be most happy to subscribe, Mr. Puddington."

"Not hunt?"

"I do not *think* I shall hunt."

"Not hunt? Good Lord! What is life without hunting? Come, come, Mr. Druitt! not hunt, eh? Why not—if I may ask as much? You own to riding, and to liking the look of a field in full cry. Why not join us, and take off ten years of your age? Grow younger every day you hear the music of the hounds."

Whereupon had ensued rather an extraordinary dialogue. People who knew the harsh-voiced, domineering Master of the Vale would have opened their eyes had they heard him in persuasive accents, softened as they only were at Tilbury Court and a very few other favoured houses, laying before Mr. Jabez Druitt the inestimable advantages to body and mind accruing from the sport he loved.

At first Mr. Druitt had merely listened ; but he had listened with respect. This was sufficient ; the speaker had warmed with his theme. In the end he had penetrated every root and fibre of the humble mind, laid bare as it had never been before, on such a subject.

"I'll take care they don't laugh at ye!" Puddington had cried with an oath at last. "Why, sir—Mr. Druitt—you have it *in* you, man! Excuse my rough speech"—a strange apology from those lips—"but it cheers my old bones to meet with an outsider—hum—ha—I mean a non-hunting man—(you see, that's how we get to look upon the world, we Masters)—to meet, I say, with a new man who, instead of thinking he knows everything, or pretending he cares nothing—'pon my soul, I don't know which is worst—they are both lies, that's what they are—to meet, I say, with any one who owns up as you do. *Of course* you want to

hunt ; and "—a hailstorm of expletives—" you shall do it !"

Under such auspices Mr. Druitt's hunting had begun.

Every horse in his stud had been chosen for him and every detail of his stables arranged by his indefatigable sponsor in the field ; no point had been too trivial for Puddington to pounce upon and set in order. The minutest perplexity was hearkened to with unbated interest and patience.

And his delicacy was marvellous ; he never allowed himself so much as a smile, though at another time he would have roared with laughter at some of Mr. Druitt's interrogations.

He never repeated them ; never let another into the secret. He was as a tender father with a young child.

Then the pride and pleasure he took in his child's progress ! His delight when a fence had been neatly cleared ! His triumph when at length the happy day arrived that our friend (favoured by luck, it is true, but having done his own part well, nevertheless) was in at the death ! Puddington's voice was heard all over the field, bellowing the news.

And he looked in at Tilbury Court as he went by, on purpose to tell Lady Tilbury.

Lady Tilbury had driven to the meet ; and

Druitt was Lady Tilbury's *protégé*; she ought to hear how Druitt had distinguished himself.

So that by the time we find the master of Old Cary Hall standing on his front-door steps awaiting his horse, and tapping his smart boot-tops with an equally smart hunting-crop as he sniffed the morning air, he was no longer a doubtful, anxious, heart-fluttering follower of the chase, but sat well and confidently in his seat; and by rigorously adhering to rule, by abstaining from every species of bravado, and by studying in secret and practising openly the line laid down by his mentor, he not only kept the favour of the loutish squire, but became his favourite boast.

"D'ye see Druitt? Didn't know a horse from a pig when I took him in hand. Not a better man now goes with the Vale—in a quiet way. You can't expect the riding of a jock from a cotton-broker turned squire. Dash it all! when I heard we were going to have one of that cattle for a member of my hunt, I was nearly sick; but Lady Tilbury asked me to call—deuced fine woman, Lady Tilbury—and I wouldn't refuse *her*. So I had the first of the new man, and you see the use I made of it. Look at him now! Goes as pluckily as if he had been born to it; and yet sticks to rules—that was what I was more afraid of than anything—that once

he got excited he would forget—hum—ha—they do, you know—they forget everything, greenhorns do, once their blood gets up. But I have never had to swear at Druitt once—no, I haven't,"—and being well away on his favourite theme, we need not follow the speaker further.

It will be seen, however, why Mr. Druitt looked so cheerfully about him on the morning in question, and why, instead of running out hastily and mounting shamefacedly when told all was in readiness, he sunned himself on the doorstep, and hummed a tune as he cast his eye over the glittering landscape, in glad anticipation of what the day might bring forth.

"If Amos could see me now!" he said to himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

“DELIGHTFUL—BUT NOT PERFECT, SOPHIA.”

BUT he had nearly forgotten Amos—as Amos.

It came upon him with the force of a shock at times to find how entirely he had severed himself from his old life and early connections.

Had there been any of them alive, with the solitary exception of his half-brother, matters would doubtless have been different ; but as it was the outside he could bring himself to feel on the occasion of a perfunctory visit to the suburban villa, wherein nephews and nieces were now growing up into men and women, was anxiety lest he should betray by word or look how little he was in sympathy with all he found there.

And they cared no more for him than he for them. The young men would express aloud their surprise at finding him in the house on the night of his arrival, and argue the point before his face, if their father, with a show of annoyance—possibly real—would maintain that the

proposed visit had been duly announced in the family circle.

The girls would fulfil their engagements—often scarcely to be called engagements—as though the presence of a relation who was not a contemporary could have no possible reference to them.

Mrs. Amos would be more civil; she was always impressed by the appearance of her brother-in-law, and she was not the daughter of a business man for nothing. Whom had Jabèz to leave his money to, other than her children?

Apart from this, she liked company and novelty in any shape; and an excuse for a dinner-party and an opportunity for wearing her new evening dress and top-knot was not to be despised.

“Humph! *He* won’t care for a big feed; and as for meeting old friends, it isn’t the few old friends Jay had when here that you want to ask. Don’t gammon me!” Paterfamilias would growl, well knowing the proclivities of his spouse. “It’s just an excuse!”—but he knew that he would have to give in to the excuse.

And in his heart, perhaps, he was not sorry; for now that the first inquisitiveness about his brother’s purchase, its merits and demerits, had

subsided, he found talk with Jabez difficult. Business transactions were no longer worth communicating ; even when shared by the latter they had elicited but a dubious flickering interest, so that it was quite certain a recital would fall flat now ; while domestic arrangements were almost worse. Jay never cared twopence for domestic arrangements ; taken to task for this on one occasion, he had roundly declared they were women's work, not men's.

So then it grew to be an understood thing that when the bachelor uncle paid his annual visit, Mrs. Amos Druitt might send out her cards, without more than a "I suppose you must" from her husband. Even this gradually gave place to "You'll want to dine some folks when Jabez comes next ; wait till then to invite So-and-so," and thus one evening of the three was provided for.

But, in spite of the brevity of his stay, no one cared to prolong it, and the guest himself experienced the strangest sensation when the last morning came. He had a sort of terror lest anything should happen to prevent his departure. He felt as though he might even at the last be caught and caged and bound down to his old office life again. He would glance at the clock a dozen times within the

hour, nervously impatient of its slow, steady tick.

And he would rise from his chair at the thrice welcome sound of the carriage at the door, with an instantaneous response that would have betrayed him to any one who had given the matter a thought.

Happily, no one did. Mrs. Amos would take advantage of the horses being out at such an early hour to drive into the town herself and do her shopping; she would be all in a bustle about her commissions from cook and housemaid, and would beg her brother-in-law to step in first while she stood at the carriage door, directing and presiding over the stowage of his portmanteau and hat-box; and he would do as he was bid, like a prisoner in the hands of his gaoler, fearful lest the slightest fluctuation in his obedience should delay the moment of release by a hair's breadth.

Once in the train—once speeding back to the little rural station now so familiar and so dear—oh, what relief! what bliss!

His black mare would be in waiting, brought by William in the dog-cart. Also, perhaps Lady Tilbury's station brougham, with the luggage-basket on the top. Or Mr. Puddington's huge brake, ready to convey a jolly bachelor party to Puddington Hall—all on tiptoe for a burst

over the countryside next day, and a carouse in the evening to follow. Even General Lossett's grey hat bobbing out of the booking-office would be a pleasant sight.

Mr. Druitt did not care very much one way or the other for the Lossetts, father and daughter; but they were part and parcel of his present delightful, congenial existence, and they were—oh, so different from the fathers and daughters he met in his sister-in-law's drawing-room! With *them* it was, they were agreeable enough when detached from one another; with the Lossett couple, neither ever showed to so much advantage as in each other's company. Their manners were irreproachable.

So that the general was secure of a lift home if seen by our traveller on alighting at his own platform; in return for which he would stand treat for a dish of gossip to be administered *en route*.

Living as close as he did to Old Cary Hall, he generally knew what Mr. Druitt was about; when he was hunting, when he was shooting, when he was entertaining company, when he was being entertained by others. Most certainly of all did he know when to be at the station on the day Mr. Druitt returned from his yearly absence in the north. He had

found out that he was absolutely sure of a welcome then.

Mr. Druitt had been in residence about a twelvemonth when the following conversation took place, which may serve as a sample of many others about the same period.

"Papa says we can't be thankful enough for having such a neighbour, Lady Tilbury."

"A neighbour at all is something, Sophia. 'Even an enemy would be welcome,' as somebody says somewhere."

"Of course it is not quite the same to you. Reggie Goffe was so intimate with you all. You must miss his coming and going."

"He would have gone to India at any rate. The sale only hastened his departure by a few months."

"And he could never have lived at the Hall." (Time-honoured remark!) "The house required all that Mr. Druitt has spent on it to make it habitable. It is delightful now, is it not, Lady Tilbury?"

"Delightful—but not perfect, Sophia."

"Do you not think it is perfect? Really? And Mr. Druitt has spent thousands on it! Papa was reckoning up, and he says it could not have been done under thousands. And yet Mr. Druitt has altered nothing he could help. We were there yesterday"—with re-

newed animation—"and he was showing us round; we had never been *quite* round the interior before, and really it is *wonderful*. Everything in the most perfect order; the empty rooms all folded up and covered with holland, but perfectly clean, and ready at any time to be taken into use. The windows stood open—all in good working order; the pictures and prints have been cleaned; the very brass glittered. And you know what terrible draughts of wind used to blow down those great open staircases? Well, Mr. Drutt has had it so arranged with screens—high folding screens and heavy curtains—that you do not feel a breath! There are double doors, too, for several of the rooms—doors that no draught could penetrate. The billiard-room—papa was in ecstasies over the billiard-room; but he had often seen *it* before; he plays with Mr. Drutt pretty often; it is such a treat to poor papa, who had almost lost his billiard play altogether for want of practice; but *I* had never seen the room, and I must say it is the nicest I ever was in. And the library ——"

"I do hope he has not altered the library. That at least might have been left as it was." Iva's voice; a pained, distressed voice. Miss Lossett's eye was upon her in an instant.

"Iva would rather it had all been left as it

was?" She laughed a little meaning laugh. "But, my dear Iva, you wait till you have seen for yourself. It is Mr. Druitt's pride that he has not touched a single thing that could possibly have remained untouched. He has not banished a single piece of furniture, however old-fashioned and cumbersome ——"

"I should hope not, indeed!"

"And all he has done to the library is to have the books cleaned and catalogued. A librarian is regularly installed there. He was working away as we passed through."

"What else?"

"Pooh! Don't listen to her, Sophia. Iva is like all the girls—crazed on the subject. It's the fashion," cried Lady Tilbury, lying boldly. "You and I have more sense. I must say I like a decent dwelling-house, and though Iva is so grand and disdainful, she wouldn't fancy walking downstairs with a rat scampering behind her, or hearing them rushing about her bedroom at night, any more than we should. Tell us more about the old place. It is really most interesting," (the Tilbury Court voice and manner,) "and quite a blessing that poor Sir Philip made up his mind to sell it before it was too late." And Lady Tilbury concluded with a flourish of her skirts, as though settling herself in for pure enjoyment—but she

gave Iva a little warning kick round the corner of the ottoman, unseen by Sophia Lossett.

Nothing loth, Sophia expatiated afresh, but on a sudden a recollection occurred. "You said something about the Hall's not being perfect, Lady Tilbury?"

"So I did." Lady Tilbury's eyes sparkled.

Miss Lossett looked interrogation.

"It needs a mistress," said the widow mischievously. It was too bad of her, but she really could not help it.

There were times when Lady Tilbury could not keep her dignity; it was an acquired dignity at the best, not indigenous to the soil; and though it came bravely to the front whenever her daughter was concerned, it occasionally failed her ladyship on her own behalf.

"A mistress? O Lady Tilbury, I should not think Mr. Druitt is thinking of that at all! If he had been a marrying man, surely he would not have waited till now—why, he is five-and-forty!"

"A very good age—and he doesn't look as much. Men of seventy marry now-a-days."

"Of course, of course;"—(mental note: Sir Thomas was past sixty)—"but," continued Miss Sophia, hastily covering the slip and her confusion, "Mr. Druitt is so emphatically a bachelor."

"He is, is he?"

"He told my father so. My father assured me, when we were debating about the propriety of my going to the Hall with him, that it would be quite absurd to stay away ——"

"So it would. If one were to stay away from every house in which there's an unmarried man," continued Lady Tilbury, "one might as well shut up shop altogether! I visit Mr. Druitt," and she left the inference to be drawn by her visitor.

"Yes. You, of course."

"Well?" said Lady Tilbury dryly.

But she took pains to obliterate all traces of the dryness ere the interview closed.

"It was too bad of you, mother; she has gone tripping away, like a young fawn, all on springs to bound in at the door of Old Cary Hall—all on fire to cheer the lone bachelor's solitary heart." Iva, half-laughing, half-reproachful, turned from a window whence she had been waving a farewell. "Poor old Sophy! How could you make such a fool of her!"

"Bedad, my dear, if you ask me ——"

"Oh, when you say 'Bedad' there's no doing anything with you. You are as wicked as a girl—so much wickeder than I. But, you know, I think, I do think—considering Mr. Druitt lives so very near them ——"

"He can hardly escape!" cried Lady Tilbury merrily. "Sophia will throw out her grappling-irons and hook him, and be installed among the clean hollands and heavy curtains, before we know what we are about. And why not? Why should she not, if she can? Mr. Druitt is ——"

"—— Far too good for her," said Iva shortly.

"Far too good for her!" repeated Lady Tilbury in surprise. "That was not what I meant at all. I was considering whether he was to be swallowed for the sake of his folding-screens and curtain-rings. Certainly he is a pleasant man."

"I like him."

"Oh, so do I."

"And if I can help it, he shan't fall a victim to Sophia Lossett!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OLD PLACE AND THE NEW MASTER.

AND it is quite possible that but for Iva Mr. Druitt might have fallen a victim. He was a very simple man, as well as a very modest one, where women were concerned ; and though he had no particular turn for matrimony, and had never been in love in his life, from sheer complaisance he had more than once nearly suffered himself to be led to the altar ere he came to Old Cary Hall.

Luckily for him, there had been some one clearer-sighted than himself at his elbow to hold him back.

“ My son, you do not really care for this lady.”

It was a gentle voice that spoke, but it was one that penetrated Jabez's heart.

He had owned he did not care—particularly.

“ But you think she cares for you ? ”

Whereat Jabez had hung his head, blushing like a boy.

This had happened on more than one occasion, and the pitfall been averted.

On the death of the parent for whose opinion he entertained so deep a reverence, Jabez, left unguarded, might have run into danger afresh, but for the upheaval of all things, which engrossed him like a coat of armour. He was so taken up with quitting the old life and entering upon the new that tender sympathy was wasted on him. It passed absolutely unnoticed.

"They think they'll nab him now," Amos had cried with his wide-mouthed grin; and the bombshell which was flung into the circle of the brother's acquaintance by the announcement of the younger's departure was the one sweet ingredient in his bitter cup. He and Mrs. Amos chuckled together as they told each other that at least Jabez carried off his two hundred thousand out of reach of Jane Doubleday and Florence Fairclough.

But although he had escaped these sirens of the North, the perils of bachelorhood were increased rather than diminished by Mr. Druitt's becoming possessor of a fine estate with a magnificent, nobly-appointed country seat. What on earth could a lone man want with such a big house? He was not shutting up half the rooms and living hugger-mugger in a poky, makeshifty way in the rest. He was not using Old Cary Hall as a sort of inn, where he and his body-servant could find accommodation during

the hunting season, and be "done for" by a resident couple, a gardener and his wife, or the like.

Nothing of the sort. Mr. Druitt had had the whole place turned inside out, cleared, cleaned, swept and garnished. Some months had been spent in masonwork, plumbing, and carpentering alone; then a whole army of furniture-mongers of one sort and another had been let loose within the walls, and what had looked to be the bare window-holes of tenantless chambers, (with panes of broken glass left unmended,) were now seen to be garnitured with curtain and blind, suggestive of comfortable habitation within.

A suitable establishment had been got together, presided over by a portly dame and her equally imposing mate. And here we may just inform our readers that the common prediction of the curious into such matters, that beneath such a *régime* Mr. Druitt would be plundered *ad libitum*, had not been and would not be fulfilled, for this reason. Jabez had known the two from his birth; and they were bound to him by the ties both of affection and gratitude.

Mrs. Grindle loved to rule, it is true; and she also loved economy, thrift, and money-saving for their own sakes; but she had her master's comfort as well as his dignity at heart,

and he was safe in her hands. Grindle, who was under his wife's thumb, was simply a fine figurehead. He took care that the footmen did their duty, and considered that when he had inspected the work, made a stir if there were a speck on the silver or a dint in a carving-knife, he had amply earned his rest upon his own parlour couch, his cigar and his newspaper, or his stroll with the dogs about the grounds.

That was his life, and Jabez knew it, and approved it.

Such a major-domo was precisely what he required, and he had had his eye on Grindle for the post for years. "If ever I should want you two," he had said in old times, "you must leave all and come to me—eh, Mrs. Grindle?" Whereat Mrs. Grindle, foreseeing a rare sovereignty, had most cheerfully assented; and when the time actually arrived she and Grindle felt as though turned out to clover for the rest of their days. But Miss Sophia Lossett and others of her kind naturally thought the clover field superfluous.

That was not what Mr. Druitt wanted. Here was a man of leisure, a man of means, a man of forty-five and no more—he *must* want a wife. It was absurd to suppose he did not mean to marry; else why, argued the logical

fair ones—why had he done up the place? It was not to be imagined that he did it up for himself! Ignoble, unworthy supposition!

“They simply can’t believe that the poor man likes to have things nice on his own account,” said Iva, adverting to Sophia’s visit. “Every one of them is the same. All the old maids in the place are cackling after him. It is disgusting, *I* think.”

Mr. Druitt did not think it disgusting, because, as we have endeavoured to show, Mr. Druitt never thought such things. He had run the gauntlet of every form of feminine attack during his mother’s lifetime, and never discovered why she was the object of so many tributes from busy fingers, the subject of such endless friendly calls and tender amenities.

She was a woman of delicacy, and did not enlighten him—unless the case were desperate. He was then just saved by the skin of his teeth.

“You will marry some day, my dear son,” the quiet little old lady would say, piercing him through with her grey eyes, “but I should like you to choose your wife, not to let *her* choose *you*.”

It was, after all, more the recollection of this phrase, which had become almost sacred in the retrospect—it was the remembrance of it and of the speaker’s keen intelligence which, more than

even Iva Kildare's watchful supervision, prevented Jabez from responding as she had feared to Sophia's advances.

But then it was Iva who—naughty girl—let in the light upon the latter. She could not, she averred, stand by and see the thing done.

"What thing?" demanded Lady Tilbury.

"Why—why—why, that old fool of a Sophia reigning at the Hall!" cried Iva hotly. "That's what she's after. It's not Mr. Druitt; he's nice enough—far too nice for her—but it would be all the same if he were old and ugly, deaf and dumb. She wants to rustle down those oak staircases, and take up her abode within the double doors—oh, I know her"—(by this time she had learned to know her; neither Iva nor her mother was so tolerant of Sophy as of yore)—"and I could not bear it; I simply could not *bear* it." Tears rushed to the girl's eyes as she spoke.

Lady Tilbury looked grave.

But presently she told herself that it was only a year since Reggie went, and that more than a year was needed to wipe out a long past like his; whereupon she plucked up spirit and retorted, quite in her own manner: "And it is you that are telling me all this, you bit of a wiseacre? Was it not I who told *you*?—And that the very day silly Sophy was here, talking

of her carpets and curtain-rings? And didn't you turn upon me—me, your own mother—and as good as charge me with being a cruel, worldly woman for making a fool of the poor creature?"

"You did find her out first," owned Iva reluctantly. Which was quite enough for Iva's mother, who, being of a generous nature, never insisted on a victory.

After this it was that Mr. Druitt began to offer one excuse and another for declining the frequent little notes of hospitality which issued from the Gate House. He had eagerly accepted them at first; even afterwards he would have been willing enough to exchange his solitary meal for the cosy board which Sophia took care should be so temptingly set forth, and where there were always one or two other guests to do away with any feeling on Mr. Druitt's part that the entertainment had been got up for him.

He had wondered a little how people like the Lossetts gave so many dinners, which, even though small, were set forth with some display and at some expense. It was a nice feeling on their part, surely; a friendly, neighbourly feeling which prompted the trouble and outlay.

Something of the kind let drop at Tilbury Court called forth the following:—

"Mr. Druitt has been dining again at the

Gate House, mother. I wonder why we are never asked?"

"Never asked! Dear me! Are you never asked?"

It was Mr. Druitt himself who interposed, looking from one to another as he spoke.

"*Never!*" said Iva, looking back at him, and not saying another word.

Lady Tilbury was also mute. After this, Mr. Druitt remembered his mother's words.

This episode was now a thing of the past; it had faded peacefully out of sight, as others of the sort had done, and no troubles, no perplexities nor difficulties marred the lustre of that glorious December morning which was to inaugurate a new departure in Mr. Druitt's life.

Mr. Druitt was in the best of health and spirits. It really seemed as though the prophecy that hunting would take off ten years of his forty-five were being fulfilled in his case. He had now had two seasons, and was beginning a third with unabated zest, and increased experience. He looked trimmer, fresher, smarter, than of yore. His whole face shone with content.

And it would be an injustice to infer that all this was due to leading a life devoted to self-pleasing, even of an innocent nature. Quarter sessions, boards of guardians, district councils,

committees of various sorts and kinds, all knew our friend ; and his early business training enabled him to be a valuable recruit in their ranks. Further, he evidenced a capacity for managing the large profitless estate with which he had now, as people thought, encumbered himself, so that it began to yield a profit, small indeed, but satisfactory to himself, and a source of wonder to others.

"I don't know but Brother Jay has done the right thing after all," even the sceptical Amos was surprised into exclaiming at last. "He was no good here ; but the bucketing he got in this office has been the making of him down yonder, and he is quite an oracle among *them*," quoth he, with a mixture of contempt and elation.

Jabez had received a kindly letter from his brother on the morning we speak of, and perceived that it had been penned with some pains. He had asked for an opinion, and Amos had given the opinion fully ; that was perhaps to be expected ; but what was unusual and pleased the recipient much was that it was delivered with a certain reservation. "You can judge better than I of this," had been twice repeated. The letter was in the pocket of his hunting coat as Jabez stood smiling on the doorstep.

The groom came round with Ladybird, his favourite mare.

"She's a bit fresh this morning, sir."

"Glad to hear it, William." Freshness had no terrors for our horseman now.

"Hey! I've forgotten my sandwich-case," cried he, clapping his pockets suddenly, and an attentive Thomas, who had appeared in the doorway at the sound of horses' steps, vanished on the instant.

"Never do to forget that, William," laughed Mr. Druitt, mounting gaily; "we ought to have a good spin to-day, and it's hungry work, when you have time to think of it. See those letters go that are on the writing-table, Thomas. I forgot to put them in the box last night. And, I say"—checking the mare, that wanted to be off—"ask Mrs. Grindle to let old Bunny have some broth or something when he calls with my boots to-day. That's all," and, his mind free of every care, he trotted off down the avenue.

"Good sort, ain't he?" observed William, looking after the retreating figure in the sunshine. "None o' yer mean, stingy, scrape-along-as-you-may gents. Get some credit out o' Druitt, you do. Good beasts, good stables, good wage—good crib altogether. Blowed if I've ever been better suited!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SISTER'S DÉBUT.

WHEN an elder sister has been for several years going about the world, and the next in age makes her *début*, it may be a very happy moment for both, or—it may not.

Where there is a strong bond of affection between the two, or even where tastes and dispositions suit, it is all right. The dispositions need not be similar ; lively and serious temperaments accord well ; a gentle nature will often wind its tendrils fast round a bolder and more vehement one, and *vice versa* ; but there must be some underlying strain of sympathy, some communion of spirit, else the new state of things is a trial to both.

Between Iva Kildare and Maud Tilbury there was all the width of—shall we say the Irish Channel ? The one was quick-witted, easily moved, perhaps a shade too easily offended, impressionable, inconsistent, sensitive, susceptible, proud one moment, penitent the next—a very creature of faults and impulses,

yet withal so warm of heart, so generous, candid, and high-minded, that time alone was needed to shape a noble woman out of the bright and lovely girl. The nature of the other was by no means so complex. She had many excellent qualities, and these were patent to every eye.

Maud Tilbury had inherited from her father much sterling honesty and worth of character. She had also all his sense of the duties and responsibilities of her position, joined to a love of justice and of truth and of plain, straightforward dealing, which would have been valuable attributes in any one, but were especially so in a young lady who would one day become an important landowner, with the welfare of many depending upon her rule.

Unfortunately, the very traits which were to be so much commended, and which in after-years were to do such good service to the tenants of Tilbury, were not those which smoothed the surface of daily life, on the emancipation of our schoolgirl.

It had been a cherished idea on the part of Maud that it only needed lessons and governess to be left behind for her to be on a level with Iva and her mother; and on the strength of this conviction she had assumed airs of superiority towards the other two who followed

in her wake, for some time previous to the great event.

"Of course I shall do everything with mamma and Iva," she had announced easily. "If Iva had married, I should have come out sooner, and taken her place with mamma ; but as she hasn't—and, after all, she is only twenty-one ; she may marry yet—I shall just go about with them," condescending to the situation.

"She is quite expecting it, mother," said Iva, in the boudoir. She paused a moment, then added gently : "Of course she is, poor child ! We must be fair to her ; only"—she sighed—"only I have had you all to myself for so long that it is a little—hard."

"If Maud thinks that just because she is getting long frocks, and has her name on my card, she is to have *everything*, she is very much mistaken." Lady Tilbury had caught the little break in the voice, and was up in arms in an instant. "Have I not given her a bedroom to herself, and newly furnished it ? And isn't she to have a ball, and to be presented in the spring ? Of course I mean Sir Thomas's daughter to be properly done by."

"She knows that, mother."

"She ought to know it. I am doing everything for her exactly the same as for you."

"I say she knows it. She is perfectly satis-

fied. I have just been up to see her things from Debenham's. She is showing them to the maids now."

"Well, aren't they pretty, and nice?"

"Very. I don't think the blue will suit her; it is not quite the shade for candlelight; but as she chose it herself, I said nothing. The white ball-dress is lovely. Oh, it is not that, mother; it is—you know," and suddenly the speaker came close up, and knelt down, and hid her face in her mother's lap.

"I seem to have lost everything," she sobbed.

It was not that during the years which had elapsed since Reggie's departure no one had come forward to take his place, for there had been several suitors, and more who would have been ready to become so on encouragement.

But Iva had turned from them all either with indifference or repulsion.

Once or twice, indeed, she had fancied at the outset that her heart might be touched, or at any rate that her hand might be won; esteem, regard, and so forth might enable her to accord it with a fair chance of right on her side, and happiness for both; but if, this point reached, there ensued further development, the ending was invariably the same. She could not do it. A form, a face, thrust itself between her and every other claimant;

and though she would have scorned to own that the flame of a day, of an hour, still smouldered inextinguishable in her breast, as a matter of fact it was so.

The flame had been waiting to be lit, perchance ; but if so, she did not know as much.

So it came to pass that, with that love-craving at her heart which so many warm young natures possess, Iva clung more and more to the one person in the world who poured out upon her love without stint (Reggie alone had done the like—never investing her with a virtue she had not, never ridding her of a blemish she had), who knew by instinct what was passing in her bosom, with whom she could speak or be silent, smile or frown, as she chose ; who was, in short, her all-in-all, now that no other all-in-all seemed possible.

Must she, then, yield this dear, exclusive right?

My readers will naturally exclaim : "Nothing of the kind. Have we not heard Lady Tilbury herself protesting against the idea? Are we not sure that she loves her Iva, her firstborn, with a love far above and beyond ordinary maternal affection?"

Ah! but Iva knew what she knew ; she knew that although her mother might fume and fret, disliking any vexatious change in

her present congenial life, and resenting the intrusion of a newcomer into the cosy *tête-à-têtes* which had obtained ever since her widowhood, she was of too adaptable, too accommodating a nature not to drop the antagonistic attitude ere long.

Gradually Maud would be acclimatised to the boudoir, and its mistress to Maud. Maud would have a seat in the carriage—*her* seat—for she would not care to be one of three on drives and excursions. Maud would be asked to pour out tea in the afternoons.

Iva hated tea-making and tea-pouring, and she and her mother had been wont to help themselves (except when visitors were present), laughing and jostling and munching together, pulling the plates about, and sharing the last piece of cake evenly between them, like children.

All such baby tricks would be impossible henceforth.

Iva had a vision of Maud, with very clean and rather red hands, fresh from soap and water, holding aloft the large silver teapot, and dropping into cup after cup the exact proportions of every ingredient; and she saw, too, the effect of this upon Lady Tilbury—Lady Tilbury, who in Sir Thomas's day had been always struggling after correct habits

and demeanour, but who of late had been more or less a backslider.

Lady Tilbury would pull herself together, and begin again.

She was still young enough and pliant enough to start unhesitatingly on a fresh tack; and it might be, might very likely be, that the admission of her second daughter to the freedom of the drawing-room and dining-room would see a new era inaugurated in the family.

"She'll get to think me wild and ignorant, she that used to look upon me as a wonder of beauty and cleverness!" moaned Iva in solitude. "Oh, why don't I know more? Why did I insist upon learning so little when I had the chance? Why did I make Sir Thomas say I should do well enough before I had really learnt anything? Maud will find out how little I know—she who has stuck to her books so steadily, and gone in for masters and classes, as well as all the rest. She is not really clever—no cleverer than I—but mother will be afraid of her; she is half-afraid of her now; because she is all Tilbury, and has the blue blood, which neither of us has. As long as she was a child, we scoffed at this, and held by each other; but now Maud will find she has the world at her feet.

She is the rich Miss Tilbury, the heiress, Sir Thomas's eldest daughter; I am but poor Iva, and haven't a relation fit to produce on this side of the water. They may do for Ireland," cried she bitterly.

And then she would fall to bewailing her beauty, which was so little good to her. Would she not have done better with a plain, useful face, with which she could have battered about in spheres where no one cared anything about dark-fringed eyes and damask cheeks? Was not a pretty girl handicapped from the very starting-point?

Maud was not pretty; she was rather handsome on a heavy, agricultural scale. "Nevertheless she will find admirers in plenty," muttered Iva.

Poor Iva was very jealous.

CHAPTER XXV.

MISS TILBURY, OF TILBURY COURT.

MAUD too began to assume airs. She had learnt the secret of her own importance, and we may be sure that first among those ready to make their own out of this was Miss Sophia Lossett.

“Of course poor dear Iva is not—she never can be Miss Tilbury, of Tilbury Court.”

Sophia was in luck ; she had dropped in for a chat, and found the elder ladies out for the afternoon ; while the younger, detained at home by a cold, and weary of her own society and the dulness of an empty drawing-room, was in the mood to make the most of a visitor. It was an opportunity not to be thrown away.

“I daresay she has never felt it till now,” proceeded the gossip, comfortably ensconced by the fire, and secure from interruption, “but she must learn the truth sooner or later. Dear Iva is so good, she will not mind it.”

“I don’t see what there is to mind ; Iva has had it all her own way ever since I can re-

member, and it is only fair I should have my turn."

"Certainly. Only fair, as you say. Every girl should have her turn, and of course, you in your position, with your expectations"—Maud bridled—"you are entitled to more than others. We all expected Lady Tilbury would have made a great fuss—a sort of coming of age ——"

"I don't come of age till I am twenty-one," importantly.

"And *then* we shall expect grand doings. Quite a young princess! You will be coming into your kingdom. Does Lady Tilbury—ah—will she continue to live here?—but pray don't think me inquisitive"—hastily—"don't let out any *secrets*, Maud, only one is naturally a *little* curious; we have grown so used to Lady Tilbury and Iva, we have come in a manner to look upon *them* as the rightful owners of this lovely place; but of course that is only our foolish way, and of course every one knows that entailed property must descend to the rightful heir, and as you are the heir ——"

"My mother has the right to live at Tilbury Court during her lifetime."

"Really? Yes, we all supposed so; but of course we could not tell. Well, that is very nice, I'm sure; very right and proper. Poor

Lady Tilbury would have felt it dreadfully if she had had to turn out!"

"To turn out! Oh, dear! I should never turn out mamma!"—(slipping back into "mamma" again). "You surely cannot suppose that, Miss Lossett?" and Maud looking very like her father in Sir Thomas's most dignified vein, Miss Lossett had recourse to a profuse explanation.

"My dear Maud, of course not. You would be the last person—her own daughter—and Sir Thomas's own daughter—how could you think ——? I must have expressed myself very badly—I am quite shocked! All I meant, my dear, was this—perhaps I ought not to mention it, but such things do happen"—archly—"as that the little god Cupid steps in, eh? And in your case, where there would be no pecuniary hindrance, eh ——?"

"Oh, I suppose I shall marry some day," said Maud calmly.

"Quite so. Of course you will. *Now* you understand me. Supposing—just supposing—you did happen to want to marry some nice young gentleman without means—they are always *the* ones, my dear—the fascinators—Reggie Goffe, for instance—what a charming, taking boy he was ——"

"Boy! Do you call him a boy? He always seems quite old to me."

"He was old enough to run away with all our hearts, at any rate"—Sophia laughed, and stroked the fur tails of her boa—"quite a lady-killer, as I doubt not Iva would tell you. Between ourselves, it was just as well for dear Iva's sake that he was carted off out of the way before ——" nodding significantly. "*That* would never have done. In her case it would have been impossible. Not a penny between them."

"Mamma would never have allowed it, surely!"

"Your mother, Maud—ahem!—no no, I don't think she would." Sophia suddenly turned out a new ending to the sentence she had begun, and eyed its effect. She suspected that her hearer would demand the meaning of its latent significance.

Maud, however, appeared satisfied, and remained silent ruminating.

"Pretty dense," muttered Sophia to herself. "But though your mother has Tilbury Court for her life, of course she has not the whole of the rent-roll," proceeded she cautiously. "I know Sir Thomas told my father that he derived a certain part of his income from other sources; and *that* money of course he could do what he liked with. Still, I suppose—oh, dear"—catching an obstinate expression on the

other side of the rug, which might be awkward to deal with—" I believe it is coming on to rain!" (For all her sheep's face, she may take it into her head to be offended, thought she.) Whereupon she changed the conversation deftly, chatted on this and that, and presently left under flying colours. One thing she had achieved; she had made Maud promise to go and see her occasionally at the Gate House.

"What on earth do you want to go there for?" said Iva one day.

"I like to go and see people; why shouldn't I? We have known the Lossetts all our lives."

"Oh, you are very welcome to go for me; only I can't understand the pleasure of it."

"Because you can't, that is not to say I can't."

"Let her go, Iva," said Lady Tilbury in a low voice. "Don't squabble about nothing, there's a dear." For of late there had been a good many squabbles about nothing; and Lady Tilbury's life was by no means so easy as it had been. She could not make the two amalgamate; and to take the part of either or espouse her cause was to turn the fiery darts of the one tongue or the one sledge-hammer blow of the other on herself.

Maud had but one thing to say: it had been

her weapon from infancy ; and though it had hitherto been a failure, the time had now come for it to be wielded with effect. She could not now be dismissed from the room for charging her mother with partiality to the daughter of her first husband.

Iva, on the other hand, felt as if her throne were slipping beneath her feet if the luckless lady strove to be peacemaker.

Oh, for the good old times when Reggie's voice in the corridor or his step in the doorway would bring Iva round, however black her mood ! Only once had he failed, and by this time Iva's mother knew why, and sighed to herself when now and again came cheerful, buoyant letters from the young soldier—brief, it is true, but not at all the epistles of a love-lorn swain.

It was obvious that he had learnt the lesson of forgetfulness, as it was best and wisest he should ; and could Iva have done the same there might have been nothing to regret ; but Lady Tilbury was not quite so sure as she could have wished to be about Iva.

“Ask your sister about those ball-cards, Maud.”

“Do you think we need ask her at all, mamma ? We know exactly what to do. I have thought it all over, and asked the Stanley

girls and the Yates girls, and we made out the programme together."

"Without asking Iva?" Lady Tilbury frowned.

"Iva would only have argued and disputed," said Maud smoothly. "You know Iva never does agree with any of us girls."

"What nonsense! You don't take her the right way. She never was like that with me. Of course, if you try to set her on one side ——"

"She will have to be set on one side some day," retorted Maud; and though the words themselves were all but inaudible, Lady Tilbury felt a cowardly shrinking from provoking their repetition.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“IVA IS SO VERY DISAGREEABLE.”

SHE felt annoyed and perplexed, but she did not know the worst—did not suspect how sad and sore at heart poor Iva really was.

The quiet life pursued by the inmates of Tilbury Court, the absence of variety and of contact with the busy outer world, fostered brooding thoughts and magnified trifles. The little family jars, the petty friction which would have scarcely been felt amidst livelier scenes, were more and more ominously prominent as summer guests dropped off, and autumn deepened into winter ; requiring all the cheerfulness and good-humour of an harmonious circle to banish dulness from the monotonous days and weeks.

Lady Tilbury and Iva had been a sprightly pair in former times ; but somehow Iva's liveliness had dwindled, and it was not even so easy for her mother to be vivacious and garrulous as it had once been.

She could not talk away at random, feeling

that there was a silence between the two who listened.

Either, if alone with her, would possibly have proved responsive enough ; for, as we have said, there was something so artless and spontaneous about Lady Tilbury that no one, or scarcely any one, could hold out against her ; but the girls chilled each other, and neither would stir an inch to thaw the icy barrier between them.

Iva, with her sensitive nature, felt the situation in all its real misery. Hers was a temperament which could not thrive except under beneficent auspices. It required all the warmth and glow of lively affection to develop its best instincts ; and these were too apt to shrink and wither—even to deny their own existence—beneath the breath of adverse winds.

A blight seemed now to have fallen upon her spirit.

And to herself it seemed as though not merely outward circumstances were at fault, but as if her own heart and soul had suffered deterioration.

She hated herself for the thoughts wherewith her bosom burnt. No wonder others found her unmanageable and intolerable ; she had no hold upon her own beliefs, no control over her own emotions.

Then she would try to recall what she had

been like before this trouble set in. When had it begun? How had it come on?

She found she had to look some way back before she could find herself a gay girl fluttering like a butterfly in the sun—fondly secure of all she most cared for, and finding it easy to be generous with the crumbs that fell from her plentiful board.

It was she who had had to intercede for the younger ones in those days; to remind her mother of their rights, and merrily scold her for not bestowing on Sir Thomas's daughters the same overflowing partiality which was extended to everything her Irish lassie said or did.

As a child she had thrust the lesser children aside, it is true, if, with the confidence of babyhood, they had clamoured for an equal share of attention and caresses from their elders; but later on she had tolerated Maud, Mabel, and Marianne—patronised them and been kind to them in a lofty, elder-sisterly fashion—and this had been sufficient. Their sluggish sensibilities demanded no more.

But now? Now all was different. It seemed as if the serpent had entered her Eden, whispering doubts, suspicions, backbitings. Whatever Iva did seemed to be wrong; whatever she said she was corrected for. Then she would

let loose her own tongue and be sorry for it ; but the mischief was done.

Life was all a puzzle and a torture.

Her very religion gave the poor child no comfort ; nay, it seemed to sting her with its own especial shaft, for by it was she not most of all condemned ? Often, after rising from her knees in prayer, the place whereon poor Iva had laid her head to sob, was wet with bitter tears. Why was she allowed to be so wicked ? Did not even God love her ?

“ Iva is so very disagreeable.”

The speaker was Maud, and her audience consisted, as usual, of Mabel and Marianne. Maud had developed rapidly under Sophia Lossett's instructions, and now openly vented her grievances and proclaimed her independence. “ It is all because I am Miss Tilbury, you know. Iva cannot endure my being ‘ Miss Tilbury,’ which means of course that I, as a baronet's daughter, take precedence of her, whose father was a mere nobody. We all do, of course ; we are in ‘ Burke ’ and ‘ Debrett ’— Miss Lossett showed me our names in their old ‘ Debrett ’ ; and she says it is quite ridiculous of mamma to try to hide our proper position from us. Mamma does it because of Iva ; but Iva ought to have married out of the way before we grew up.”

It was now no longer "I shall go about with mamma and Iva"; Iva's very presence was resented by Miss Tilbury, of Tilbury Court.

"All the neighbours are talking about it, Miss Lossett says," proceeded Maud, revelling in the thought. "They say it will be so difficult to know what to do if they have both of us at dinner. They cannot send in Iva before me, and it will seem rather unkind and awkward to send her after. They are quite puzzled; some of them have been asking Miss Lossett what she thought."

By such and such like fables did Sophia tickle the girl's credulous ear, and pay off her ancient and lately augmented grudge against Iva. Maud absorbed it all, said little, but came away from each interview heavy like a sponge; and at the first squeeze she poured.

Only Mabel and Marianne squeezed, since neither Lady Tilbury nor Iva suspected what was going on; and the mischief-maker was always careful to supply her visitor with various items of innocent interest wherewith to satisfy general inquiries.

"I do think you sometimes provoke Iva," said Mabel.

Mabel did at rare intervals throw in a dissentient word. She liked talk for talk's sake; it was exciting and delightful to hear

what Miss Lossett had said, and to gloat over the idea that the world outside Tilbury Court was at variance with itself regarding their several claims on its notice; but she was not actively antagonistic towards her half-sister.

She had even an occasional twinge of pity for Iva. Once she felt sure that Iva had been crying. She said nothing about it to any one.

"Provoke her? What do you mean? Provoke her?" cried Maud in sharp, vexed accents, as the above took her somewhat by surprise. "How do I provoke her?"

"You say nasty things with a face that pretends not to be saying anything."

"What nonsense! It is Iva who says nasty things to me—not I to her." After a pause: "I suppose she has been complaining to you? That was why you took her part last night after you came in from your walk?"

"She never complained; she never said a word. We talked of other things altogether—of books and our favourites in them—and Iva was quite gentle and nice. She gave me that lovely ribbon afterwards."

"Bribing you!"

"That's a shame! You know she often used to give us ribbons."

"Her cast-off ribbons!"

"You were glad enough to get them. You

used to be as pleased as anybody when Iva called us to her room after she had turned out her drawers. You are wearing a belt she gave you at this very minute!"

She was, and could not deny it. A spirited girl would have disposed of the awkwardness by throwing aside the gift; Maud contented herself with belittling it.

"That's nothing!" she said contemptuously. "It's a ugly thing and Iva did not care to wear it herself, so passed it on to me. I forgot it had ever been hers."

"And I remember how grateful you were for it," persevered Mabel. "You had to bore some fresh holes, because your waist is so much bigger than Iva's; and you flew to have them done."

"Well, well! what does it matter? What is all this rant about? You seem to be all on her side now, and I don't think it's fair; for we always agreed that we three were to stand by each other ——"

"Oh, but we do."

"Not if you are going off to Iva, and saying that I provoke her."

Mabel was silent.

"Are you going to walk with her again?"

Now, it so chanced that the seventeen-year-old Mabel had been not a little elated by the unlooked-for promotion; and having enjoyed

her ramble and Iva's genial mood, was looking forward to a repetition of the same. Iva had talked with her as an equal; while even Mabel had found a change from the one invariable topic agreeable.

Iva had said that she would ride in the morning of the following day, and be ready for a walk by three o'clock, when Mabel could leave the schoolroom behind, to be her companion.

"Why does she choose you and not me?" continued Maud angrily. "If that's not favouritism ——"

"But you drive with mamma."

"I needn't. Iva knows that. Or she could walk at some other time. Why does she choose the very hour when the carriage comes round?"

"Because I am not free before."

"It's all of a piece," said Maud. "Miss Lossett says so. Iva has been swaggering here as eldest daughter all these years, and now directly I grow up and that can't be kept up any longer, she is in the sulks all the time." She did not rest till she had forced the reluctant Mabel to promise that the walk should be abandoned.

"I'll ask mamma to take you with us in the carriage, if you like," she finally suggested, to clench the matter; anything was better than letting Iva and Mabel hob-nob as she and

Sophia Lossett hob-nobbed. But alack! this was not put into words, or the phrase might have opened our young lady's eyes a little.

Iva, truth to tell, was quite as well pleased to be off her bargain as the two who had conspired against it. The proposal had been made from a sense of duty, and a dread lest her growing love of solitude might be misinterpreted. But to be voluntarily freed from the necessity of rousing herself from solitary musings—which, if not too sweet, were yet a sort of bitter luxury—for the purpose of talking, and talking *down*, to suit the comprehension of an unintelligent schoolgirl, was a let off. She was able to congratulate Mabel quite cheerfully on the luck of having a half-holiday and a fine day for her drive.

"If you are going to make calls, you had better borrow a pair of my gloves," she added.

But Maud turned sharply on her sister. "How can she make calls? You forget that Mabel is still in the schoolroom. *I* never was allowed to go calling."

Which was perfectly true, and more than Iva could answer. She had once been a great stickler for the proprieties, and of late had forgotten all about them. They had served her turn; in themselves they were of no consequence.

She saw the party off, and breathed a sigh of relief as she wandered off in the clear wintry

afternoon, not in search of adventures—for adventures were not to be come by in that peaceful rural spot—but at least to call in the aid of open air and exercise towards cheering the mind and freshening the body. “I get ‘so lazy now-a-days,” thought she. “A good walk will blow away the cobwebs.”

“Good-evening, Miss Kildare.”

It was Mr. Druitt on Ladybird : Mr. Druitt returning from a glorious run, and in the true fox-hunter’s vein, dying to tell every one about it.

Iva turned quickly. In another minute Mr. Druitt was walking alongside. He had slipped off his horse, not sorry to do so after being for so many hours in the saddle ; and passing the bridle over his arm, was jovially prepared for conversation.

How rosy and healthy and kindly he looked ! No cobwebs about *him* ! No fretting, mean, miserable little worries. Oh, if she were only a man ! And a man such as this—good, kind, replete with the enjoyment of life, yet unspoilt by fortune !

The village rang with tales of Mr. Druitt’s goodness and benevolence. Even the Hodges, loyal as they were to Sir Philip and his heir, had been won over. Dr. Stevens openly exulted, his only regret being that he had never

had a chance of *not* exulting over the fallen Reggie. He would have liked to show young Mr. Goffe that he could be generous.

In short, Mr. Druitt was beloved and respected by all, and only Iva, in a tart mood, had once observed: "Any one could be kind and charitable with plenty of money, plenty of time, and no one to say a word, whatever one did,"—but she forgot to think of this now, with Mr. Druitt at her side.

Mr. Druitt was always at his best with Iva—that is to say, he came out of shell entirely. Fears and doubts such as assailed him whenever he called to remembrance the maternal warnings of old were out of place, would have been preposterous, so far as Iva Kildare was concerned.

Such a nice girl! So unaffected; so natural and charming! He could say what he liked to her, behave as he liked with her, and have no nonsense thought.

To begin with, he was double her age, (possibly rather more, but he was not eager to be exact,) and to go on with, she was above him in social standing; and was furthermore a lovely creature, probably refusing offers by the dozen, waiting only for the survival of the fittest. She was not only wholly to be absolved from any suspicion of a design upon his freedom, but would have been insulted by such. Oh, he

could be very safe with Iva! Safe, merry, friendly—it was a delightful feeling.

What a beautiful evening it was; fit close for a glorious day! What had Miss Kildare been about?

Having exhausted his own doings, our fox-hunter, feeling half ashamed of the expansion into which he had been led by the joy of having an auditor, now drew away from his own concerns.

It was then that for the first time he noticed a shade on Iva's brow, a gravity in the full, dark eyes which were upturned to his. Beautiful eyes they were; Jabez felt a little stirring of his pulses.

"Do you often walk alone?" he queried next, having elicited only vague responses to his former interrogation.

"I do—now." The hesitation, and some significance in the "now," struck Mr. Druitt. He began to perceive.

He shot a second and more searching glance.

No, he had not been mistaken; the fair oval cheek, with its rich, soft colour, on which the setting sun was casting a lingering beam, was not that of a happy girl, and at the very moment he was thinking so, an involuntary sigh burst from lips that, rosy and ripe as they were, drooped at the corners.

Iva was looking straight in front of her, but Jabez Druitt moved a pace nearer to her side.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"IT MEANS—WHAT IT MEANS."

"DEAR me! Mr. Druitt here again! Why, this is the third time within a fortnight! Well, I am sure I am very glad to see him," quoth Lady Tilbury, who was always ready for a man in any shape. "Go down, Iva, and say I am coming. Shan't be a minute."

"I can wait for you, mother."

"Wait? Oh, no need. I am only going to take off my muddy boots; the roads were in such a state!—but you go down, and say I am coming. Is tea up?"

"They were taking it up as we crossed the hall. I found Mr. Druitt on the doorstep, and brought him in. He's all right; I put him in the drawing-room and left him there."

"Is Maud coming down?"

"Not till dinner."

Maud was nursing a cold in her bedroom, and things had in consequence gone more smoothly for the past day or two. There had been a revival of the solitude *à deux*, which,

possibly in conjunction with something else, had revived Iva's spirits, and she looked quite the Iva of old as she lingered in the room whilst Lady Tilbury put her hat straight and clasped her collar anew in front of the looking-glass. Suddenly she popped down upon the floor.

"Let me unloose your boots, mother."

"Thank you, love." A neat little hob-nailed boot was put out. No one had a prettier foot and ankle than Lady Tilbury; and she employed a Bond Street bootmaker even for the strong-soled, serviceable boots in country use.

"What a nice little foot you have!" said Iva, talking away. "It is smaller than mine, though none of the girls can get on *my* shoes."

"Sir Thomas was always proud of my feet!" The widow took a complacent peep, as the foot emerged from its covering like a kernel from its husk. "It was he who told me where to go for my boots. He always wore great clumsy things himself, fit only for a ploughman; but I had to show him my feet whenever I had on a new pair, and if they weren't just right he would fuss till they were."

"Where are your slippers?" said Iva, looking round.

"Over there. Oh, but it's nice to feel your

dear little warm hands," said Lady Tilbury, patting her on the shoulder. "Oh, but my feet are cold!"

"They have no business to be cold when you have been walking." Still holding a foot in one hand, Iva stretched across the floor, and drew towards her the slippers which were within reach. "You should have changed directly you came in, madam mother, and not allowed your little toes to get cold. Now you're ready; now we'll go down," and she held open the door and stood back till Lady Tilbury, always rather disposed to drift about a room at the last, was fairly through the door-way; when, attaching her by the arm, the two proceeded downstairs.

Lady Tilbury, who was usually quick enough, did not notice anything peculiar; and if Mr. Druitt felt any disappointment at being left to his own company until both ladies were ready for it, he kept his feelings to himself.

He was standing by the window, looking out; and only turned, rather quickly, as the door opened.

Mr. Druitt, albeit not in hunting costume, (for a frost had set in), looked nice enough in a well-made homespun suit with fitting accessories, and an experienced eye would have seen at a glance that he had not come to call

on the ladies of Tilbury Court without being prepared to find them at home. He might have donned useful gaiters, but he had picked his way carefully through the mud, and there was scarce a speck upon his boots. He might be gloveless, but he had a smart tie.

"I am afraid I become troublesome, Lady Tilbury. I told Miss Kildare I was ashamed to be found so soon again at your front door, and with no excuse for boring you with my society except the pleasure I have in yours."

Considering the number of times the little speech had been mentally rehearsed, it was delivered with a very creditable amount of spontaneity. Mr. Druitt had been making it up for the last four-and-twenty hours, and had only varied the formula by a trifle after meeting with Iva. Instead of going in straight with "I am ashamed to be found, etc.," he threw in "I told Miss Kildare I was". This to himself seemed to re-construct the whole, and give it a new coat of paint.

New or old, it suited its purpose. "'Tis the best excuse a man could have," retorted Lady Tilbury, surprised and pleased; for she liked those sort of things to be said to her, and hitherto the speaker had not been lavish of them. "Who wants any better reason for a friend's dropping in than that the friend likes

it?" continued she gaily. "But I am afraid I kept you waiting. I had just gone up to take off my things ——"

"What things?" wondered he. She had still on her hat, and looked charming in it.

"Iva tried to hurry me, but I am getting old and slow," proceeded Lady Tilbury, who knew that she was neither. "We have been on the tramp this afternoon," and she proceeded to enlarge.

Mr. Druitt, however, experienced a momentary thoughtfulness. Why had Iva been so anxious to hurry her mother? For his part he had not seen the precise need for Miss Kildare's being her mother's messenger at all. A servant could have informed Lady Tilbury.

Was there anything beneath? Yet he and Iva had talked freely, had sauntered through the woods leisurely, and parted—dare he think it? reluctantly, twice since that first accidental encounter.

The other meetings had not been accidental on his part. He had contrived them both; with prudence, of course, and ingenuity—oh, he had taken every precaution not to set tongues a-wagging—still, he had managed to emerge from his farm buildings just as Miss Kildare tripped along towards the post-office on one occasion, and another time had followed

her from afar until she was well within her own grounds, when a short cut brought him naturally, and, as he fancied, unremarkably, to her side. It had been so cleverly accomplished that his request for an extension of the stroll did not seem too presuming.

Of this third meeting Iva had said not a word.

Neither would she go down alone to Mr. Druitt in the drawing-room.

But with her mother present the young lady was gay, at ease, intimate. She did not scorn to know that Mr. Druitt liked his tea well sugared, and preferred brown bread and butter to cake. These items had been learnt long before; our bachelor had been entertained many times, and at meals of various kinds, since becoming Lady Tilbury's near neighbour and very good friend. As the trio now sat together in the witching firelight, for only a few scattered lamps supplemented the blaze of flaming logs, Mr. Druitt's only wonder was that, having been so often thus encircled, he had not been so oftener still.

He had certainly neglected his opportunities.

"You will be quite thrown out of employment if this frost lasts long, Mr. Druitt."

"Oh, I have always plenty to do, Lady Tilbury."

"You won't find it necessary to dash up to town, as most foxhunters do?"

"To town? No, indeed! I have no love for town."

"Nor have I—in winter. Still, hunting men do find themselves grievously at a loss when they can't get out after the hounds."

"They have time for *us*," said Iva archly. "They make up their arrears in the calling line; don't they, Mr. Druitt?"

"To be sure," added her mother readily. Then with a gay laugh: "We shall have Mr. Puddington here to-morrow, and Mr. Hinderton the next day ——"

"And Mr. Druitt again on the third."

"Must he wait till the third?" said Mr. Druitt, turning boldly on the last speaker. "It is very lonely up at the Hall. If Mr. Druitt finds himself unable to resist the temptation of having Tilbury Court so near, will his presumption be pardoned, Lady Tilbury, even though the third day seem a long way off—too long to wait for?"

He addressed the mother, but his eye rested on the daughter. Iva rose hastily, and adjusted a neighbouring lamp which, she said, smoked.

No one else had seen it smoke.

"I hear you have a wonderful workshop, Mr. Druitt," observed his hostess, next. She had

accorded the above sally a light answer, frank and gracious, but not more than the occasion merited, and was now ready for a fresh topic.

So apparently was he. The workshop was enlarged upon; it was one of his hobbies; he had three apprentices, Jem and Giles Hodge, and his groom William. If Lady Tilbury liked to let any of the youths in her establishment join, he would be happy to enlist them.

"Shall I send Robert, Iva? It is a capital idea," said Lady Tilbury warmly. "Robert is a nice boy—our second footman, Mr. Druitt; and only yesterday the others were lamenting that he was so hopelessly unmusical he could take no part in their evening performances. They have quite a concert in the servants' hall in the evenings. Three or four of them play on different instruments. Our butler is a wonderful hand. But poor Robert is rather out of it, and if you really would have him ——?"

"By all means."

"He would be too thankful to go, don't you think, Iva?"

But not a word was to be got out of Iva.

"You began by absolutely flirting with Mr. Druitt," cried Lady Tilbury afterwards. "Turning the poor man's head with your 'third day' and all—almost asking him to come—and then all at once you flew off at a tangent, and were

barely civil. Too bad of you, Iva. I think he is a dear man, and I won't have him maltreated."

"Maltreated? Who talks of maltreating him? Not I. I told you he was a dear man long before you found it out for yourself. But as for flirting—I'm sure you flirt with him far more than I do."

"Tut! That's nonsense—sheer, silly nonsense! As if Mr. Druitt ——"

"Oh, Mr. Druitt knows a fine woman when he sees her! So does Mr. Puddington; ditto Mr. Hinderton. As for the dean ——"

"You goose!"

"What it is to be overshadowed by such a mother!" cried Iva, throwing up her hands. "What a fate for a poor young daughter! Two husbands has she had already, while I can't get one! All the men are at her feet, while nobody wants poor Iva."

"You storyteller! Oh—oh!"

"Lossett, V.C., would be number three tomorrow if you held up your little finger. Puddington, M.F.H., curses his luck ——"

"You strange girl! Don't talk like that." Lady Tilbury, looking a little frightened, put her hand on Iva's shoulder and shook it gently. Iva was laughing a strained, unpleasant laugh.

"Mayn't I have one little shot on my own account?" she cried. "Mayn't I see what it is

like? A fair field and no favour, that's all I ask. Let us start fair."

"Iva, Iva! How can you? What's wrong with you, Iva? Iva mavourneen, you're not yourself at all! Oh, don't be vexed with your own Molly—your own mother! See, then I'm not vexed with you, darling. I know—I understand. It was only a joke, wasn't it? Just one of your own old little jokes?" But Iva did not respond to the caress.

There was a cold silence.

At last: "Now what does this mean?" said Lady Tilbury, straightening her back and fixing a steady eye upon her daughter. "Iva, I ought to know; what does this mean?"

"It means"—Iva stiffened also; the ugly smile left her lips, but she stood her ground, and reared her head with a proudly defiant gesture—"it means," she said deliberately, "what—it—means."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AMOS AND HIS APPENDAGES.

MR. DRUITT also thought that it meant what it meant, and found the thought intoxicating.

Good Heavens! Was he to meet his fate at last? Was this to be the end of his long bachelorhood? It looked like it—looked prodigiously like it; the more he turned the matter over in his mind, the more did it look as if—he took off his hat, cold and dark though the night was—as if this strange venture in his life, which had already proved so great a success, were to be crowned in a manner the most extraordinary and unlooked for.

He had always admired Iva Kildare, looking upon her as a bright particular star, destined to shine one day in more exalted spheres; and beneath this conviction, (which had not troubled him in the slightest,) had allowed free vent to his admiration.

Never until the day when it dawned upon him as a revelation that her lot was not the radiant one he deemed it—nay, that she looked

sad, subdued, tremulous ; almost coveting the pity and sympathy with which all at once his bowels had been stirred—never before then had he bestowed upon her a thought which might not have been known to the whole world.

But the emotion, once awakened, soon found abundant food whereon to feed.

Iva was young, impulsive, imprudent, as we know ; also she was keenly unhappy ; it soothed her ruffled spirit to be with a gentle and tender companion who was for the time being all her own.

Without exactly complaining, and certainly without any sense of treachery, she let it be seen that division and discord had penetrated her beauteous home, so fair to outward view ; and often silence more than words, laid bare to the sympathetic eye of her new friend the discontent, the dull dissatisfaction of her soul.

Obviously she took pleasure in his society, seemed cheered by it, was almost lively at the close of each interview.

And it must be remembered that Jabez was by no means ill-looking. Even in his office clothes, hideous now to memory, he had presented a marked contrast to his brother ; while his own present appearance presented an almost equally great one to his past. His proportions,

if somewhat minute, had capabilities, which were now made the most of. He might be pardoned for not considering himself either debarred by age or exterior from entering the lists for a fair one's favour, supposing the glove were thrown to him.

Had the glove been thrown? He thought it had.

There was one drawback to all rosy dreams, however; and for a while our bachelor jibbed at this like an uneasy horse, who prefers not to take a hedge without knowing the width of the ditch behind. The drawback was Amos—Amos, with all his appendages.

So far these had never been seen at Tilbury Court, not a little to the chagrin of the lady, who had arrived for her first visit to Old Cary Hall armed to the teeth with dinner-dresses and head-dresses, and who would not have despised a tea at the doctor's rather than be going nowhere.

Her host, however, had his brother's express wishes to fall back upon, and carried them out to the letter. "You are not to be worried to go anywhere," he would say cheerfully on each occasion; whereat Amos would emit a contented grunt, and confide in private that although he had been forced to bring his evening suit to satisfy *her*, he had no intention

of taking it out of his portmanteau, where it lay snug and ready to travel back again.

In consequence, Mrs. Amos, who, if she could not get into Tilbury Court, would have put up with any sort of excuse for bedizening herself, found the hints with which she had come prepared, thrown away. She had mentally argued that there was no need for her husband to go where he did not wish, or do what he did not like; but that was not to hinder Jabez from taking her about to the different fine houses where he had been forced to own he visited. Why should he not drive her about in phaeton or brougham, while Amos was let loose to walk down his fat about the nice, healthy, country roads?

If she were not introduced to Jay's friends, how could they take any notice of her?

And though Amos was so lazy and boorish about meeting strangers, Jay need not have taken him so strictly at his word as never to have *any one* at the Hall.

It would have been such an opportunity for Jay to return hospitalities. She would have headed his table with pleasure.

This, however, could not very well be impressed by letter upon a person out of range, when the lady was penning her acceptance of

the annual invitation ; and by the time she was fairly installed within her tapestried bedroom at Old Cary Hall (she always had the best bedroom ; it was a compliment easily paid), it was too late for anything to be done.

There had accordingly been three visits as to which, had the lady been a sportswoman, she would have said the covers were drawn blank.

But it is the unforeseen which always happens.

In mid-January, just in the nastiest part of the nastiest month of the year, according to Amos Druitt, there appeared a most unusual summons from the south. Not only was it addressed to the wife instead of to the husband as previously, but it contained the most startling information. The writer was about to issue cards for a dinner-party, and would his sister-in-law engage to do the honours ? If it were not asking too much, would they both come to the Hall on the following Wednesday ?

The pair looked at each other in amazement, and the letter dropped upon the tablecloth, where no one troubled to pick it up.

" Oh, don't bother about stupid Uncle Jay," said a girl. " Do give us our tea, and you and papa can talk later."

But neither papa nor mamma heeded her.

"Here's a rum go!" quoth he, staring with open mouth round upon everybody.

"My word! What next!" cried she, starting back.

Both then attempted to inform the young people, and inspire curiosity and interest; but in vain. John wondered who would be fool enough to go a couple of hundred miles for a "spread"; while Cecilia thought all dinner-parties detestable, and added that if her uncle had had any sense he would have asked her and her sister for his Hunt Ball. What was a stupid old dinner-party?

The parents, therefore, had all their excitement to themselves; and at the first Mr. Amos Druitt, albeit owing to the impeachment, protested that it was occasioned merely by such an unwonted departure on his brother's part. He had no notion of *going*—not he! It was all very fine for Jabez. Jabez meant to do the civil, no doubt; but hang it all! it was a great deal to ask of any man. Jay had a cool cheek to take for granted that he had only to put pen to paper to have them both at his beck and call.

To all of which did Mrs. Amos listen in silence, biding her time. Her green satin with the apple-blossom border? Or her black lace over the white moiré, if she chose to be for the occasion in slight mourning? Which? The

girls said she looked best in black, and, to be sure, the *moiré* was a handsome dress ; but the rooms at Old Cary Hall were dark, and the apple-blossom satin would show off finely against the massive oak panelling on the walls.

She must get a new plume for her top-knot, however, and not forget to use her diamond crescent at its base. Which fan should she take ? And was Tubbins sure of the new way of dressing her hair ?

“ Hey, you’re mighty silent ! ” cried Amos at last. “ You think you’re to go, I suppose, and sit up at the head of that great table, with grandees on both sides of you ? And where, pray, am *I* to sit ? You and Jabez would run the show between you, I don’t doubt ; but where I come in I don’t see at all. Not that I’m going,” he added hastily. “ Don’t you think it ! It is too far—and in such weather ; and what hindered his getting up this fine dinner-party for us in October ? There would have been some sense in that, (not that I care to be bothered with anything of the kind ; plain folks and plentiful fare for me ; none of your lords and ladies and kickshaws,) but you have always been hankering and hinting ; how was it you did not manage to pull it off at the proper time ? October—there would have been some sense in October ; partridges, pheasants, venison—and

grapes and peaches in the garden. Now you have to buy everything—and it's bad at the best. Those grapes at Bowwater's last night might have been turnips; great, coarse, flavourless things; can't think how Bowwater could put such trash on his table! But he always goes in for size; and they looked well enough. If we *do* go to Jay's, I know what I should do; I'd get him to let me have the ordering of his fruit, and I'd select it myself from White's, and take the hamper in the carriage with us—eh, Mrs. Amos?"

"That would be the thing to do," assented she, spying daylight—"if you could be sure fruit would travel so far," she subjoined, with wily dubiousness.

"Travel? I'll engage it should travel. I'd see it packed myself. I'd speak to White this very day. He is the only fellow one can trust—and he couldn't cheat *me*, anyhow. And I say, Polly, what about a refrigerator? Down at that outlandish place, their only chance of ices would be making them in a refrigerator. Should we lend him ours, hey? I know how it is worked—could work it myself if it bothered Mrs. Grindle. Good old soul, Grindle; she wouldn't mind."

"Never minds anything *you* do, Amos. You are such a favourite."

"Ah, well, they are a very decent couple. Jay was in luck to get them. We always have our joke together, Dame Grindle and I. I tell her she's getting a bit thin on the thigh, and all her big caps can't hide it; but she makes up by putting on a double allowance of fat everywhere else—ho, ho, ho! We're old chums, she and I, and she likes a bit of chaff."

"That kind must certainly be pleasant!" muttered Cecilia sarcastically.

Cecilia's mother, however, laughed; she would have laughed at less to keep things working towards the desired end; and she now saw that the end would be achieved by only a very little further diplomacy.

"Jabez ought to be grateful to you, I must say," cried she. "He never would think of things like that. I'm sure the dinners at Brookfield — Shall I say anything about the refrigerator? They might like to know beforehand."

"Aye, you'd better. Tell them to have plenty of cream—good, sweet cream—and I'll see to the rest. And see here, if I'm to cater for the dessert, I won't have it spoilt and messed up by inferior articles shoved in at the last. I'll do it all, or nothing. Mind you make that clear."

"You're going, then?" Cecilia arched her

eyebrows impertinently. Her mother frowned ; but it was too late.

"Humph!" bounced Amos, and slammed the door behind him.

He crept back when his wife was alone, however. "Those girls with their impudence!" cried he. "What is it to them whether we go or stay? It's none o' their business, confound them! They're savage because they're not asked, I suppose. Look here, missis, we'll go and have our jaunt, if *we* please. And as I see you're set upon it—hey?"

"I must own I should like to go, Amos."

"Well, well, and why shouldn't you? You're a good lass, and if it pleases *you*, I don't see that I'm bound to take your daughters' opinions. Let them mind their own business. You write and say we'll go. We'll go on Wednesday, and stop till Saturday. Don't ask me to stop over Sunday."

"Oh, dear! I should never think of such a thing. It is very kind of you to give so long," joyously.

"I must be at the office first thing o' Monday morning. And night travel doesn't suit me. So if you're willing to quit on Saturday ——"

"Certainly. I shall say we must leave after breakfast on Saturday."

"Aye, do ; that will get us back in decent

time. After all, if Jay has a mind to be brotherly, and likes to see his own folks about his table, 'tis only fair to meet him half way. But make it clear about the fruit," added he, pausing in the doorway to consider if there were anything else. "I suppose you've got as many diamonds as you want?" he suddenly burst out.

What woman has ever as many diamonds as she wants? Certainly not a rich merchant's wife, with an ample person whereon to spread them.

"Dear me, Amos!"

"Had a haul last week, and didn't bring you anything out of it, old lady. Meet me at Elkington's at four o'clock. And I say," returning the beaming salute with one in kind—a splashing smack it was, but affection sanctified it—"I say, mum's the word. Don't you let the cat out of the bag, or I shall have them all upon me like a set of harpies. It will be time enough to show anything we get at Elkington's when we come back from Old Cary Hall."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SECRET OF THE LETTER.

AND this was how the invitation was received which it cost Jabez so much to send.

Ah, what tales could such a little note or even its mere envelope sometimes tell, if it might say its own say ! It speeds upon its mission, bearing upon its surface the commonplace message, the bald fact, or the bitter lie—and of the reluctant fingers which hung over the page, of the quivering pulses which rested on it, of the hot breath which burnt and scorched it—not a word !

No one ever knew the secret of Jabez Druitt's missive, which was not worth lifting off his brother's tablecloth.

It was calm, formal, fraternal ; it begged a simple favour in simple fashion ; and who was to guess that it had been written, re-written, torn to bits, and commenced afresh time after time, ere it irrevocably passed from the writer's hand and vanished from his sight ?

After all, what was it he had done ? He had acted the part of an honest man—that was all.

A little thing to do, dear reader? Wait till you and I are tried, and see if we do it.

Oh, it is not until we ourselves are confronted with that moment of dismay, when our struggling sensibilities shrink from the straight high-road that leads to honour, and every by-path looks more smooth and tempting, that we find out what poor mean-spirited cowards we are!

Jabez Druitt had come face to face with such a moment, when considering whether he were justified in asking Iva Kildare to be his wife without ever bringing her into contact with his nearest of kin.

Until now he had seen no need—no need whatever—for obtruding these upon a world which cared nothing about them. Possibly the world he meant was fully aware that they existed, as relations always do exist who are best kept in the background; certainly he had never been asked an inconvenient question.

But now it was different. His people must be in a measure his wife's people. Amos was only a half-brother, it was true; but he would have to be accepted as such, together with all his belongings, young and old; and if, despite natural affection and old association, there were times when this brother, familiar from infancy, still touched a raw nerve, awakening an irrepressible twinge, how would it be

with one to whom Amos in his full panoply of vulgar egotism and blatant self-assertion would come with all the shock of a novelty ?

Was Iva not already condescending sufficiently in deigning to look kindly on himself ? Was he not far, far beneath her as it was ?

And neither Amos nor any of his family had ever shown the slightest sense of any distinction existing between them and others in a higher rank. They would be very well pleased that he should marry into a baronet's family, as they would phrase it ; but he could already hear the pert Cecilia contradicting Lady Tilbury on her own ground, or John boldly chaffing the younger girls.

He pictured his brother's bow ; Amos would salaam like a tradesman.

After all, would not Lady Tilbury prefer ignorance to revelations which might only work mischief ? Lady Tilbury herself, if report spoke truly, had connections who were barely up to the Tilbury level. He wondered vaguely whether Sir Thomas in his courting days had come across any of these, and if not, and if they had been kept out of sight, how had Sir Thomas felt about it ?

Had Lady Tilbury meant to give himself a friendly hint on the subject one day, when it chanced that the discussion turned on ties of

blood, and her ladyship, with a somewhat raised colour, had delivered herself of views which were not perhaps strictly orthodox, but which had found a ready echo in his breast? "We choose our *friends*—we cannot choose our *relations*, Mr. Druit," she had concluded, with an emphasis which left him wondering.

Certes, he had not chosen Amos.

And yet he knew—knew for a truth, which argument could not reason away—that he would never be able to look himself in the face again if he yielded to the temptation of securing Iva Kildare's promise before revealing to her the (do not laugh at him) skeleton in his cupboard.

But no one, we repeat, ever guessed how much it cost Jabez to arrive at this conclusion.

He now went and came at Tilbury Court with all the confidence of a favoured suitor. Several weeks had elapsed since the day on which Iva would not go down to be with him alone in the drawing-room, and if there did happen to be any little demur of the kind now, it was so plausibly explained away that, with all his modesty and anxiety, he could not feel himself an intruder.

Once or twice he had been on the point of speaking—no, of writing; it would be easier to write than to speak—but things were very pleasant as they were, and there was always the *arrière pensée* of Amos.

So terrible was the latter, and so agreeable the former, that "Really Mr. Druitt is rather a slow man," said Lady Tilbury once, with a smile.

Having taken in the astonishing fact that she was to have Mr. Druitt for a son-in-law—a fact which required a good deal of swallowing, but sat kindly on the stomach once fairly gulped—the volatile creature was now all agog to have matters settled, and announce the engagement. It might not be all she had once expected for *Iva*, but it had its good points; undeniably it had some very good points.

Mr. Druitt might be five-and-forty years of age, and might have made his fortune in a Manchester warehouse; but the fortune was there, and Mr. Druitt himself was a man of whom no one need be ashamed.

Furthermore, he lived close by, and lived at the finest place in the neighbourhood. What if it had not belonged to his ancestors?—it was his own. Sir Philip Goffe had inherited broad acres and could not keep them; Mr. Druitt owed no man a "Thank you," but reigned royally over the land he had rescued from destruction. Which was the better man?

"I shall give out that the match has my fullest approbation," concluded she, and beamed on Mr. Druitt in a way that pleased Mr. Druitt

very much. He liked Lady Tilbury amazingly. He admired her little less than Iva. When he had either the one or the other to talk to he was almost equally happy, and a seat between the two, with no one else to interrupt and distract, was Paradise.

If only he could have been sure that Iva would be of her mother's mind, when he must needs spring upon them Amos!

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. DRUITT'S DINNER-PARTY.

THURSDAY evening—the evening of Mr. Drutt's dinner-party—had arrived, and if only old Father Stevens had been alive to see it, how his eyes would have gloated over the bustle of preparation, the hurrying to and fro of important-faced domestics, the many lights, the general joyous din within and without the mansion!

But the old doctor had passed away very shortly before, and there was no one now to peep from the hole in the wall, where the grass had grown long and rank, hiding it even more securely than before from the ken of passers-by.

Only Iva now and again cast a glance towards the spot where she and Reggie had once stood together, the while he pointed to this and that upreared turret and rugged outline, with his light laugh and careless jest—which had yet in it a wistful undertone, depriving her of all desire to join in the merriment.

Had Reggie forgotten the broken wall?

He had said when he left that he should never see it again; but such sayings are not meant to be recorded. They are but the cries of pain from a sufferer whose wounds are fresh—and, the wound healed, would not the exile be amenable to reason?

"He would come if I asked him," reflected Iva, looking up at the grey pile, as the carriage conveying her and her mother to the dinner-party rolled loudly over the cobbles.

Iva was shivering with excitement, her eyes glittered, and there was a bright patch on either cheek. She would have preferred not to speak, but Lady Tilbury simply could not hold her tongue.

It was a great night for Lady Tilbury, and she had done honour to the occasion; Iva's delicate cream-tinted robe, with its rosy sprays and garlands, was not more suited to the lovely wearer, not more charming in itself, than her mother's pearl satin veiled in opal gauze.

"We must be at our best, Iva," Lady Tilbury had said early in the day.

"Why must we?" Iva, rather inclined to be captious and contradictory, had snapped round at this.

"Well, for the *house*," laughed Lady Tilbury. "To tell the truth, I feel as though Old Cary Hall itself had issued this invitation, not being

able to endure its own solitude any longer. It is very wise of Mr. Druitt not to have attempted entertaining before. He has waited till he has made us all frantic with curiosity and eagerness, thinking we are never going to be asked. He has whetted our appetites for the feast. If he had begun by inviting people directly he had got the place into order, and before he had shown the sort of man they were to find, they would either have refused point-blank or gone to stare and criticise. They would have said it was simple 'cheek'. Oh, you needn't start, my dear"—coolly—"you needn't take up the cudgels on Mr. Druitt's behalf; I am quite as fond of him as you are; all I meant was that having come, as you know he *did* come, from nowhere, it behoved him to wipe out the Goffe sympathy, and neighbourly prejudice, and all that, before he could venture to hope for a hearing on his own account. I am lauding Mr. Druitt for his wisdom and patience and prudence."

"I don't believe Mr. Druitt ever thought of all that."

"If he did not, he hit on the right thing to do by instinct, which is better still," nodded Lady Tilbury, not to be put down. "Come, Iva, don't be silly! There is nothing to be cross about. We are going to enjoy ourselves to-night, you

and I ; and those huge, gloomy rooms—though I daresay they will be lit magnificently—still, our best dresses will not look too grand.”

Like Mrs. Amos Druitt, she took into account the dark oak panelling ; and, like her also, Lady Tilbury loved to be fine—on occasion. The difference between the two lay in this, that what with one was a normal with the other was an occasional passion. Mrs. Amos would have shuddered had she been asked to wear Lady Tilbury’s favourite garden hat and skirt—but then perhaps Lady Tilbury would not herself have admired Mrs. Amos in them.

“Very well ; I don’t mind,” said Iva after a pause, during which she had looked from the window thoughtfully. After a moment’s hesitation she crossed the room, and came and stood behind her mother’s chair.

“I suppose it is all right?” she said in a low voice. “You know what I mean. I do like him ; I think I could be happy with him. He is both good and pleasant ; and if he cares for me”—her eyes filled and her voice trembled—“I have so few to love me—and oh, mother, you don’t *know* how I long to be loved ! Yes, dear”—in answer to an instant embrace—“*you* do ; but I don’t mean you.” She sighed, and could not go on.

What could not be said was that the fond

partiality of a widow who had already had two husbands, and who it was quite on the cards might have a third, or even a fourth—for why stint her? it was only wonderful that Sir Thomas had not already found a successor—that was hardly the precious gem so coveted, longed for, yearned for.

Lady Tilbury did not, it is true, fritter away her affection in dribblets. Iva had the lion's share of what she had to give; but was it the poor woman's fault if the well from which the fountain flowed were a trifle shallow?

It was at any rate pure, sweet, and wholesome—and only of late had Iva found it insufficient.

"I know you were happy with Sir Thomas?" murmured she inquiringly.

"That was I, honour bright, Iva."

"Yet you did not love him as you loved my father."

"Your father didn't deserve the love I gave him," said the widow promptly. "He would have broken my heart if ——"

"I know—but you loved him."

"Oh, I loved him—more shame to me!"

"So. You loved him and were not happy with him—and you did not love Sir Thomas and *were* happy with him. 'Tis a queer world," said Iva, with a queer little quavering smile.

"So it is, darling; don't you worry about it.

There's nothing so crooked but it pulls straight at last. But if you have any feeling *against* Mr. Drutt—any kind of 'grue'—do you dislike him to touch you?" demanded the mother suddenly.

"Oh, not at all. No indeed. It rests me to feel him near. I like to look into his kind eyes and feel the clasp of his kind hand. Mother, if I felt like *that*—as you say—if he woke any kind of repulsion in me ——"

"That's it; one ought to be sure of that, Iva."

"But I don't. Oh, you can't think I would be so cruel to him, so false to myself, as to dream of marrying him with any feeling of that sort between us? You can't think that of me?" cried Iva, withdrawing her fondling arms and stepping back a pace. "How hateful—how wicked you would make me!"

Whereupon Iva's mother, with joy at her heart, protested and explained; and, in reality, was glad that the outburst had taken place and cleared the air.

For Iva was presently chatting away quite bright and cheerily—having herself, for all her intenser moods, a touch of the mercurial Celtic blood—and as she ran upstairs after a while to give orders about her evening attire, the snatch of a song floated down behind her, and Lady Tilbury, peeping in upon the consultation later, found the bedroom all bespread

with finery, and laughed to herself, well pleased, as she passed on.

Maud was not to go to the dinner, whereat Maud was very wroth; but the other two were of one mind on the occasion.

"Here we are, and here we go!" whispered Lady Tilbury, stepping into the carriage gay as the child embarking on a frolic. "Up with the windows, Iva, or we shall take cold, when we are both so excited—and I could not bring myself to heap on a fur cloak over these lovely sleeves—nor could you, I see." She had on a delicate summer opera cape.

"We must take our chance," proceeded the lively lady, shrugging her shoulders. "I hope the rooms will be well warmed—but of course they will. He is not the man to neglect any one's comfort, and we poor things in our low necks would be killed by draughts—Iva, where was it we were so miserable because the electric light had just been put in, and they had not reckoned on it's being so cold?" And she prattled on.

A carriage was turning in at the gate, and another was passed in the avenue, returning empty from the front door.

"Isn't it fun?" cried Lady Tilbury. Perhaps the dean's wife would have reverted to her first impression had she heard. She never could be quite sure yet that Lady Tilbury, in

spite of her "kind heart," was not rather a silly woman. Certainly, for a middle-aged lady of position, she had quite a ridiculous amount of animal spirits.

She now cleared the window pane from its trickling dew with a whisk of the carriage rug, and strained her eyeballs to see what she could see. "It looks like a place in a fairy tale, Iva—so weird and ancient, yet so gay. Who would ever have thought of seeing Old Cary Hall like this? There are—who *are* they? I wish I could see better. Who can those people be?"

Iva did not care who they were; her thoughts were otherwise engaged.

This beautiful place, these romantic halls, were they to be her home? Her present home was also beautiful and stately in its own way; but not like this. Tilbury Court had no vast recesses, no mystic archways, no historic memories.

She hoped—she did hope—Mr. Druitt would not look out of place in their midst.

It seemed a cruel hope, and one that ought not to have arisen. Had not Mr. Druitt already shown that he appreciated to its fullest extent the romance of such a dwelling? Had he not in quiet confidences betrayed the gentle enthusiasm with which it inspired him? She need not be afraid, and she shook off the passing shadow ere it had even been perceived.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"IF THIS ISN'T HIGH SOCIETY!"

"Good gracious! what a very dreadful woman!"

Mrs. Amos Druitt was in all her glory. Never before, she told herself, had she sat at a table flanked by a dean on one side, and a K.C.B. on the other—moreover, there was a general and an M.P. further down the board. A general and a member of Parliament in secondary places! She forgave Jabez everything.

He was no longer an idle, foolish dreamer; no longer a deserter who had left her husband in the lurch; he had done the right thing at last, and bygones should be bygones in the light of this splendid atonement.

On her arrival the night before, she had wanted to fuss and fidget, to inquire into arrangements and preparations, and be posted up, as she declared, in her own part. Her countenance had fallen somewhat when she found how small, apparently, that part was.

"I shall introduce the ladies to you, and you will know how to get on with them," said her

brother-in-law quietly. "I don't imagine there is anything else."

"But how shall I know which is which, or who is to receive the most attention?"

He had then produced his list, and instructed her; but when he had done she did not feel much enlightened. She would have liked more detail. Lady Tilbury of course she knew about; but there was Lady Wormall, and Mrs. Chancellor, and ——

"I cannot tell you more about them than that they are my neighbours," said he. "I have been at their houses, so now they come to mine. You will help me to make it agreeable to them."

"Oh, of course. Still, if I knew what to talk about ——"

"Will they not know that? I am no judge of such matters, but I should have supposed that it would be for *them* to lead the way, that *they* would ——"

"To be sure. Oh, we shall get on excellently, I don't doubt! A dean's wife is sure to be a nice person; and Lady Wormall—who did you say Lady Wormall was?"

"Her husband was an Indian judge, and knighted on his retirement."

"Then I must talk about India."

"You'll land yourself in a precious mess if you do." Amos had been listening, all ears,

up to this point ; any information that came to him in a round-about way would be greedily drunk in ; but he was not going to play the interrogator on his own account. He loved the sound of his own voice, however, too dearly to keep silence longer, and moreover, fancied his brother had said all he meant to say on the subject.

"What's talk?" said he contemptuously. "Any one can talk. Your Indian what-d'ye-call-him will want to eat his dinner—not to be bothered with gabble. Is your soup sure to be right, Jay? Old Indians know what's what in soup ; and I expect your nabob comes prepared for a guzzle."

By the time Jabez retired to his toilet the next evening, he almost wished he could undo what he had done. He had not remembered what Amos was like on the occasion of a dinner-party.

All day long, having nothing better to do, Amos sauntered about, his hands in his pockets, watching the arrivals. Here was the station van ; here the confectioner's cart. He met both at the back entrance, and followed them into the yard. Whistling softly under his breath, he stood by as hampers and boxes were unpacked, ready to bear a hand if required, competent to issue instructions which no one seemed to need.

True, Mrs. Grindle and the cook were rather flattered than otherwise by his raids into their domain, but Jabez, who had sought him in vain at the farm and stables, would rather have found him anywhere else than seated on the kitchen table inspecting the stock-pot.

It was no use saying anything, however.

"Want me for the wine, do you?" said he, jumping down delighted, and grabbing a handful of raisins off the dresser as he passed. "All right; I'm your man. Enjoying yourselves, girls, are you?" he nodded at the maids as he went by.

And the wine kept him amused for an hour.

Jabez, patiently standing by, felt relieved by having provided such a respectable employment; but, the cellar left behind, he was as bad and as busy as ever. No bell could ring without his demanding why; no errand-boy could go in or out without being cross-questioned.

Mrs. Amos was quieter, being occupied with herself, and with "keeping fresh" for the evening. But she caught her brother-in-law whenever she could, and fretted him with little worrying questions which never turned out to be needed—for "Was it likely," cried Martha Jane to Mary Ann, "that we didn't know what rooms should be used?"

And had not the two worthies worked up yards of muslin and ribbon into toilet-covers

and pin-cushions for the vast unused chamber which was to serve as cloak-room for the occasion? And had they not got a whole pound of wax-candles for the sconces out of Mrs. Grindle? Even Mrs. Amos owned it looked very nice when she passed on her way downstairs, and an open door permitted a view of the brilliant illumination within.

Mrs. Amos was in her green satin with the apple-blossom border ; she had consulted her husband, whose dictum, "Whichever is the swaggerest," delivered unhesitatingly, had decided the point at once ; for if the "swaggerest" were the test, there could remain no doubt upon the subject ; and as she now rustled down, resplendent in diamonds (the recent addition prominent), and perceived that the maids were duly impressed, she congratulated herself on having taken Amos into confidence. Dress was the one subject on which she would have said he knew nothing, but he had for once hit the mark ; and as she exhibited herself to his approving gaze, and saw that he had also made an adequate effort, the couple were mutually pleased with each other.

They had the apartment to themselves, for Jabez was late in coming down.

And when he did come he never once looked at the gorgeous apparition on the ottoman. But

then, no doubt his mind was taken up with other things, allowed Mrs. Amos indulgently.

She was mistaken; it was not his mind—it was his heart which was full.

Throughout the evening the struggle continued. Mr. Druitt's unknown relations, now for the first time brought into contact with his new neighbours, were scanned by all, and scanned, as he could perceive, narrowly. He could see the dean looking, and could feel Mr. De Vere wondering. Even the brusque, untamed Puddington, whose taste was not supposed to be nice, was twisting his beard with a puzzled expression.

Jabez had counted on the support of Puddington's voice; but the voice was curiously subdued.

And how was it that Puddington, whom everybody called a coarse man, and against whom not a few doors were closed—how came he to look so emphatically, unmistakably a gentleman, standing by Amos, eyeing him from beneath his bushy eyebrows?

Amos was not doing badly at all. He was singularly inoffensive—taken as Amos. Jabez could even detect a meekness and nervousness which almost amused him, for now that the curtain was actually up, all the self-consequence seemed to have gone out of the man. Jabez felt a shade happier.

And Amos, in his turn, was perhaps equally surprised by the demeanour of his brother.

"Quite at his ease!" cogitated he. "Quite at home among the nobs! Well, if *this* is what he has been hankering after, I'm bound to say he has got what he wanted. If *this* isn't high society! Eh?"—in a sudden flutter at finding himself addressed—"eh? What d'ye say?"

It was only Jabez, summoning him to be presented to the lady whom he was to escort to the dinner-table. She was an ordinary-looking dowager, and he made his bow with equanimity. Anyhow, she was not a "Lady," and he thought he could cope with a mere "Mrs."

But on entering the dining-room (he had taken a sly peep on his way downstairs, and been satisfied that his handsome dessert was well stacked and set out) he was again in a ferment. Where was he to sit? He had always been accustomed to "hunt after his ticket," as he informed his partner, but now he could not find his ticket.

He had been desired where to go; but had hustled past, unheeding. He now stood hot and cold, uncertain whether to advance or retreat, till every place was filled except the two to which he and his lady were entitled, when these were seen to be on the opposite side of the table, and they had to tramp round.

"Stupid creatures!" muttered he as they did so.

He recovered, however, as dinner went on. It was a good dinner—of that he was a judge; it was also well served; and the wine, as to which he had given written directions (only endured by Grindle out of respect for certain business transactions which would yield him a rare profit through the acumen of Druitt & Son—no longer Druitt Brothers,) the wine was correctly handed.

He would have liked to comment upon the wine; to call attention to the vintages, and boast of the cunning with which the pick of certain cellars had been secured for his brother through himself—but somehow he didn't. He did not feel that he could. He must content himself with eyeing it in the glass before drinking.

Unfortunately, before the evening was over he had drunk enough to make him no longer shy, no longer miserable, no longer conscious of the dean's dignity and Mr. Puddington's hauteur.

Puddington himself had relaxed, and was now disposed to treat his host's brother as a wag, an odd fellow, a humorist; Mr. De Vere had discovered that the short, stumpy, whiskered man seated about the middle of the table, was the very person to give him some commercial information of first-rate political importance,

and had hurried round to his side immediately the ladies left the room ; and all had magnified his wealth and cared no longer for his vulgarity.

In consequence his tongue was loosened ; his laugh resounded.

Not an acquaintance he possessed but heard of the evening afterwards—the evening when he had been as jolly as anybody among the swells, directly he had broken through the crust.

It had to be endured ; Jabez had brought it upon himself. He strove to think “ Better now than after. Whatever comes of it—better now than after ”—but the thought scarcely cheered him.

During dinner he had only one glimpse of his sister-in-law. It was when she rose from the table ; the dean was speaking to her, and she tapped the dean with her fan—tapped him to be silent, while she swayed and smiled to Lady Tilbury. Apparently Mrs. Amos had also broken through the crust.

In the drawing-room it was the same ; the pair had now got out their horns, and were no longer watchful and careful ; the apple-blossom satin, with its redundant breadths, rustled hither and thither, its wearer quite the hostess—yet a hostess devoid of tact, elegance, inobtrusiveness ; while on the hearthrug, with legs apart and coat-tails ditto, straddled the bulky figure

of her spouse. Amos, full fed, and puffed with wine, talked unceasingly.

Jabez looked almost piteously into the faces of his other guests. One and all had been kind to him, admitted him to their friendship, and accepted unhesitatingly of his hospitality. Of what were they thinking? Mr. Druitt was not a man of the world; it galled him to see the broad amusement on Puddington's face and the twinkle in the dean's eye. General Lossett was eagerly seizing the opportunity, hitherto denied him, of paying court to the supposed millionaire—but the others were laughing at Lossett.

Mr. De Vere, having learnt all he wished to know, had retired to a distant arm-chair to ruminate thereon; and little thin Sir William Wormall, as to whose guzzling proclivities Amos had been so confident, was wandering about restlessly, keeping clear of the hearthrug and its occupant, but casting occasional glances thereat, as though wondering what would happen next.

"None of them will ever forget this," thought Jabez sadly. Could he only have told them that he too would never forget!

He had not, however, called the gathering together without its definite purpose, as we know, a purpose which, after all, made everything else of secondary consideration. The

real point at issue was not—Do my neighbours think my brother a common, ill-bred fellow, and his wife his counterpart? but—What does Lady Tilbury think? What does Iva Kildare think? Try as he might, he could not penetrate the thoughts of either.

“No, and he shan’t.” Lady Tilbury unflinchingly presented Mr. Druitt with all that he could read in her countenance. She knew perfectly when he was looking at her, and what he was looking at her for. She also saw, to her joy, that Iva was her own daughter, and that there was a dual front set to baffle the explorer. Accordingly, he made nothing of either, and as the evening drew to a close his spirits sank lower and lower.

The carriages began to roll away.

“Iva!” Lady Tilbury’s voice in a quick, imperative whisper. She had stepped into the cloak-room and found it by chance empty; Iva was behind, and the two were alone.

“You see what he has done this for?” proceeded Lady Tilbury in an eager undertone. “Quick! I want to say something. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Did he ever say anything to you about those relations coming?”

"Never."

"Poor man! I *love* him for it. Iva, listen: I shall ask him to bring them to us to-morrow night."

Iva started.

"I shall," said Lady Tilbury distinctly.

A restless movement.

"But I shall," repeated Lady Tilbury, and went out.

Mr. Druitt was standing by himself at the bottom of the staircase awaiting her descent, and perhaps he had never been so surprised in his life as he was by her first words. Could he believe his ears?

"Yes, do," said the lady gaily; "do come, all of you. If Mrs. Druitt will kindly excuse my going back to the drawing-room to invite her personally? I did not think of it till this moment. We shall be alone, but that you will not mind. May we expect you, then?"

She had taken his arm, and was stepping along by his side. Would she feel the arm tremble.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Lady Tilbury."

Lady Tilbury might make what she chose out of the remark. As a matter of fact, she comprehended it perfectly.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HE HEADED STRAIGHT FOR TILBURY COURT.

GONE—gone—gone!

Who has not known the glow of relief, the throb of ecstasy, when they are really and actually gone—not merely going, but gone—those terrible guests whose presence entailed cordiality and amiability, and a suffocating intimacy, while yet nature at every turn rebelled? What a deep-drawn sigh bursts from the bosom—how do the muscles of the face expand! Hi! Juno—good dog!—here, here, here! There's a good Juno—shall have a run to-day! A fig for trouble—avaunt thee, duty! The sun shines, the birds sing—all is holiday! The incubus is removed. Richard is himself again.

Mr. Jabez Druitt stood at his hall door, listening till the last sound of the departing wheels died away, and turning to re-enter the hall with a skip, was only just stopped in time by the vision of Grindle, with an expression of countenance so like his own that it told him

what his own must be. Instinctively he recognised its counterpart.

After all, what did it matter? Grindle knew all about it; had known the brothers for twenty years and more. But even Jabez did not suspect how intelligent was the eye which followed his retreating figure.

Nevertheless he would not speak to Grindle just then; decorum forbade exuberance, and for the life of him he could not have opened his lips without betraying exuberance.

The past was past; the present, the future, were painted in sunbeams. Amos and his wife had betaken themselves back to their native element, brimful of exultation and gratitude, and, so far as he could gather, the poor souls had done him no mischief, but had rather, in a way that could hardly have been hoped for, strengthened his hands. Lady Tilbury had survived them; Iva had condoned them. The evening at Tilbury Court had dispelled any lingering doubts, and he felt that he was now free to go in and win.

Accordingly, Mr. Druitt planned out his day without more than the usual agitation of a man about to make his proposal with a fair chance of its being accepted.

The earlier hours must be got through somehow—they were not the hours suited to such

an event. But about three o'clock he would order his horse and start upon a ride, and the ride should bring him round by Tilbury Court some time in the witching dusk, when he might be expected, and would certainly be welcomed. He had dropped a hint of this the night before, and a significant pressure of Lady Tilbury's soft hand had conveyed its own response.

Lady Tilbury had been steadily, patiently agreeable throughout the evening. She had not been herself—that he could not expect; there had been no flow of animation, and not a trace of the Irish accent—but he had admired her all the more for this. How well she did it! How dignified, how graceful, how charming she was! Mrs. Amos could not laud Lady Tilbury enough nor quote her enough all the way home. It was “Lady Tilbury told me” this, and “Lady Tilbury showed me” that, at every turn. Amos had sat quiet for once in his corner of the brougham—the truth being that he hardly cared to let it be perceived how elate he was.

There had been no party—the compliment was all the greater.

Maud, it is true, had looked “Miss Tilbury,” and it was an unpleasant surprise to Jabez Druitt to find that she took the bottom of the table, (he having never dined at the house since her

emancipation,) but a few words from her mother had prevented inward superciliousness from taking active form. She was alive to the advisability of the impending match, and had even consented to keep out of Sophia Lossett's way whilst it hung in the balance.

As for Iva? Iva had looked lovely, courteous, gentle—a shade too pensive, perhaps, but then had she not owed to him that she was not happy, and had not this confession been the very root of his present hopes?

He wondered if the Amos Druitts had detected anything. They were dull folk except where their own interests were concerned, and he had carefully regulated his behaviour. If any suspicion of the truth had crossed their minds, at least they had not allowed as much to escape. Only once did he fancy that he felt a foot movement which was not meant for him, and that Amos was rather hurriedly interested in the night and the appearance of the stars—so much so that he forgot what he was going to say—when in the very midst of the Tilbury talk; and another time Mrs. Amos gave a little cough which struck him as artificial. But if it were a warning note, he could not think what had called it forth.

Nor did he care; no harm could now be done. Gone—gone—gone! The field was clear.

He whistled joyously and ran upstairs like a boy, to make ready when three o'clock drew near.

The afternoon was cold and raw, while the lanes would be hard with frozen mud ; but it was all one. He need not go far abroad ; would cut short the round decided upon in the brighter morning hours, and make the weather his excuse for expecting to find the ladies at home while daylight lasted.

There was not a gladder man in Somersetshire than Mr. Jabez Druitt as he rode forth from his own gates that dismal winter afternoon.

Its very dreariness pleased him. The frosty mists which hung about the tree-tops and veiled the distant landscape were picturesque, exhilarating ; the clatter of his horse's hoofs had a merry ring ; odours from reeking manure-heaps by the wayside had a healthy, wholesome perfume. He snuffed them up.

He paused upon the top of a slight ascent to note a red spark which tore through the silent country, and found jocularly in the shriek of the flying train.

It was these sounds, these sights, these smells he loved. A donkey which bounced out at him from a bit of open ground and started his horse was, after all, only a donkey ; and Jeremiah was

a silly old fool, and his shying and plunging and starting forward on a frightened canter only warmed himself and his rider ; and when the little episode was over, and a watch could be taken out, and the watch—though Mr. Druiitt held it to his ear—persisted in ticking steadily, while yet its hands only pointed to half-past three o'clock—even the watch was restored unharmed to its pocket.

To be sure, it was a delightful afternoon for a ride. Jabez stopped short, and a shamefaced smile stole over his face. No one would ever know ; he quietly turned round, and headed straight for Tilbury Court.

Tilbury Court had another avenue than that by which he usually went and came ; and the original proposition in our bachelor's mind had been to make for this by a *détour* longer or shorter according as fancy pleased, or patience lasted. A grass lane intersecting the road he was pursuing, would have brought him to this distant entrance in very reasonable time for his call—that was to say, if the lane were passable ; but therein lay a risk ; he might get landed, and have to turn back in the very middle of the lane, or, worse still, towards the further end. “ I just won't,” thought he doggedly, and wheeled on the spot. What a blessing to be alone, and do exactly as he chose !

Nevertheless, Mr. Druitt rather hoped to encounter no one who had seen him start, and whom such a swift return would set wondering, as he trotted back ; and could he have shirked clattering through the village, with its noisy cobbles, he would have done so. As this was impossible, the next best thing was to provide himself with an excuse in the event of General Lossett—ha! was that the general? A very queer word for a man like Jabez to use exploded internally, and there was a quick jerk of the rein, which had the effect of nearly stopping Jeremiah.

But the grey outline, which took a dozen shapes ere it finally relieved our horseman's mind, although probably not unlike what the old soldier's had been thirty years before, resembled it now only in being slight, while Lossett was lean, and making up by erect carriage for an inch less of actual height.

"A young man," said Jabez to himself, eyeing the advancing figure with equanimity, "and no one I have ever seen before. Looks pretty hard at *me*," and he rather wondered he was not stopped by an inquiry as he sauntered past. Indeed, he could have sworn the stranger made a movement towards him and stopped. "I should have been most happy to tell him the way," reflected the courteous Druitt, for a moment distracted from his own affairs. "A

stranger, evidently. I trust I did not look forbidding. Nice-looking fellow, too."

He was turning in at the gates of Tilbury, and the temptation to see what the nice-looking fellow was about was irresistible. Without peeping directly over his shoulder, he could easily do this, while the lodge-keeper fumbled with her key, and a pat on Jeremiah's haunches supplied the pretext. His eye stole round.

To his surprise, the pedestrian was no longer on the road; he had scrambled up the bank immediately above the spot where he had been passed, and was now leaning against the moss-grown wall which bordered Mr. Druitt's own domain. He had gone straight to a gap in the masonry, of whose existence the owner was now for the first time aware.

"Saw it from the wood, and thought he'd have a peep at the place."

*The easy explanation satisfied a mind already overcharged with its own concerns, and acknowledging the dame's curtsy as she drew back one of the folding gates, horse and rider passed through, and the latter dismissed the subject from his thoughts—or rather, it vanished of its own accord. Why should a stranger not look through a piece of broken wall?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"THERE HE WAS!—HE HIMSELF!"

"Iva!"

Lady Tilbury stopped short, with staring eyes and parted lips. Then she took a step forward as though to see better, but her terrified, bewildered gaze never left her daughter's face. A horrible fear shot through her veins.

"Iva!" The voice sank to a whisper; the speaker caught hold of a chair to steady herself. "Iva, what is it? What—what is it, Iva?" Iva had left the house early in the afternoon, having been more explicit with her mother regarding Mr. Druitt than she had ever been before, and Lady Tilbury had remained behind to receive him in a very comfortable and contented frame of mind.

All was going well, and there was every favourable omen for the future. Iva had scouted the idea of thinking the less of Mr. Druitt because of his lowly birth and inferior connections—indeed, she had so nicely discriminated between him and them, and so

handsomely appreciated his motive in bringing them to the front, that such zeal could only proceed from a warmer feeling; it was obvious that so ardent an espouser of his cause was more attached than she knew.

She had even jested at her own tremors as the afternoon drew near. "You must have the first of him," she had protested in private. "You must take the edge off"; but it was understood that, although fleeing the scene in its early stages, the coy maiden would return without fail to bear her due part in it ere the dusk began to fall.

Now, not only had the dusk fallen, but darkness set in.

Mr. Druitt had waited and waited; at first cheerfully, buoyed up by the encouragement already received, (for Lady Tilbury had meted this out with no measured hand, her own consent having been won as a matter of course;) afterwards with growing uneasiness.

Could it be that the delay was of set purpose? He did not put the question, but betrayed its presence in his breast, and Lady Tilbury, who, with all her faults, was neither a liar nor a hypocrite, had met the doubt upon his brow with an emphatic, almost passionate denial.

"What it means I know not, Mr. Druitt,

but this I do know. When my daughter left me two hours ago, her last words were: 'Keep him till I return,' referring to you and your promise of coming here to-day. So far from wishing to evade you, I—no, I don't think I must tell you what Iva said—but of this you may rest assured, absolutely assured, that if I saw her enter the room at this moment, I should have no fears nor misgivings. Something has detained her—I wish we knew what—but that is all."

Presently it was "I cannot help thinking some accident must have happened; Iva is *never* out in the dark like this".

Finally, Lady Tilbury rang the bell, and the pony cart was ordered to go down to the village to fetch Miss Kildare. "I don't quite know where she is," said her ladyship, carelessly, "but look about till you find her. Possibly you may pass her in the avenue."

Mr. Druitt was not taken in by the carelessness. A slight tremble in the voice and a nervous movement of the hands fully enlightened him, and the door had no sooner closed than he rose to go.

"Let me join in the search, Lady Tilbury." (Lady Tilbury started at the word.) "If anything has happened to Miss Kildare"—his own accents faltered, but shaking off what

might be only a foolish presentiment, he continued more briskly—"she may have slipped and hurt her foot, or some trifle of that kind, you know. It would need only a very slight misfortune to bring about grave inconvenience in this lonely neighbourhood. At any rate, I must go," he wound up, less formally, more hurriedly; and she was glad to let him go.

Another hour had passed; one of those hours we all know when weary watchers in a silent house, and then all at once had come the joyous sound of voices and steps, while "Thank God!" burst simultaneously from Lady Tilbury's lips.

It was Iva; of that there could not be a doubt. Iva—and ——? She opened the door cautiously. If Mr. Druitt were there—but Mr. Druitt was not there. The old butler had shared his mistress's anxiety, and listening from the portico, had been the first to hail the wanderer in. It was his voice that had suggested Mr. Druitt's.

And then Iva had stepped into the room, and the mother, despite relief, curiosity, and eagerness, had been frozen to the spot whereon she stood, by the expression on the girl's face.

"Iva—for God's sake—what is it? What—is—it?"

"Hush!" said Iva, coming up close to

her. "Mother! mother! don't look at me like that! Don't. Wait till you hear. O mother! something has happened. Something so strange ——"

"What, Iva, what?"

"I can hardly tell you. I—let me come near, and hide my face," burying it as she spoke. "Oh, my tell-tale face! It ought not to look happy, ought it? And oh, I *am* happy—only ——"

"Poor darling! poor little one! Don't cry so—don't."

"Is it a dream? Mother, say it is not a dream. I did see him. I did speak to him. He held my hands and kissed me, and he said ——"

Lady Tilbury was just in time; she felt the falling figure slide through her arms, and clasped it tight; another moment, and she had laid the unconscious girl upon the nearest couch, and was ringing the bell furiously. "Send Mrs. Dowling here this minute, with brandy, sal-volatile, anything! Miss Iva has fainted; she has walked too far." The door shut, it was: "My beauty! my darling! Mavourneen, mavourneen!—it's raving she was! Iva! Iva! What is it? What has done it?"

But Iva neither heard nor spoke.

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"Go away, all of you!" said Lady Tilbury imperatively.

Maud, Mabel, and Marianne had huddled together as of old, with an instinctive return to past habits, under a sense of exclusion from the drawing-room; but at the close of what seemed to them an interminable period they attempted a sortie. It was met by the above.

"And now, my darling, tell it to me all over again," proceeded the same speaker in another accent, full of the tenderest sympathy. "I am not angry with you, Iva—no, nor will he be; he is too noble, too generous. Mr. Druitt—I wish you had heard what he said when he spoke of you just now. It was beautiful"—wiping her eyes—"that's what it was. He would never have presumed, he said, never have dared to lift his eyes to such a pearl, if—if ——"

"If I had not encouraged him," said Iva in a low, mournful voice. "Oh, I did—I did! He may well say I did—and led him on; and ——"

"If you did, my poor darling, sure 'twas no harm. You ——"

"Stop!" Iva lifted herself up, and shook back her loosened hair, betraying the tear-stained face with its wild eyes. "Stop, mother. Do not excuse me; do not pity me. I—for my own selfish needs—resolved to awaken in his unconscious breast a feeling that it would *never*

of itself have owned. I set about to stir this into being. You did not know, you did not suspect it, but I did. Oh, I have been so cruel, so cruel!" she moaned.

Lady Tilbury was silent.

"And if this had happened one day later—or—or worse still, a few months!" sobbed she. "If it had happened when *too late*——!" She shuddered from head to foot, and could not proceed. There was a pause, broken only by deep breaths and sighs.

"Well, it has *not* happened too late, for which we ought to be very thankful to a merciful God." Lady Tilbury pulled herself together with an effort at last. "No one could have foreseen anything so extraordinary as this; and, as you say, a very little delay ——, but now I want to hear the whole story from beginning to end; and then we must consider what is to be done, and how it is to be done. Wait just a minute"—she rose to her feet—"I must go and pacify the rabble," she murmured, with a half smile. "Poor things, it's hard on them to be all on the *qui vive* and hear nothing. Lie still for a few moments," and she vanished. Iva sank back upon the pillows.

When her mother returned, both were calmer, and the tale began.

"It was too early to come home, and I wanted

to pass the time. I told you I saw Mr. Druitt turn in at the gate, so I crept behind the old tree near the bridge, and meant to wait about inside the park till he had been up here about half an hour—long enough for you and he to have it all out. But I had just started to follow, leaving him time to get well ahead, when suddenly I felt I wished—I don't know why—to take one more look from the hole in the wall."

"The hole in the wall?"

"You don't know it, but Reggie once showed it me; it is a broken gap—a sort of crack—which some one must have widened by pulling out the stones; and through it you can see Old Cary Hall quite near. You know, though there is a long avenue, it winds and turns, and comes back again, so that the house is close to the high road."

"Of course I know that, Iva."

"But you did not know that from this gap there is a splendid view ——"

"Well, I can believe it. A little faster, dear."

"Impatient woman! you want to get on to ——" Iva blushed and stopped.

"Of course," assented the widow, fondling her. "Now, then, you shy thing, what next? When did you see him? And how? And

did he see you at once? Directly? And how did you meet?"

"I—oh, no, I really can't tell—I don't know. Stop; let me think." Iva covered her eyes. "I was so frightened; at first it was *all* fright. I tottered ——"

"It was enough to make any one totter."

"To see *him*—*Reggie*—standing there, in the old place, leaning into the gap just as he used to do! And, mother, was it wrong—was it wicked?—I was—yes, I was thinking of him at the very moment! Indeed, indeed, I was only thinking kindly—and perhaps a little sadly—for it all seemed so hard. There was Mr. Druitt riding by, rich and prosperous, with everything he wanted, everything that ought to have been poor Reggie's—even to *me*"—lower—"you know that Reggie did tell me, before he went—you know what he said. And now, I could not help thinking it seemed as if Mr. Druitt—oh, poor Mr. Druitt!—it was a shame to think it—but it seemed as if he were a sort of robber—as if he had stolen the place, and everybody's affections, and even my love. For I thought I loved him—I thought it, really and truthfully—up to just the very moment ——"

"I understand. It's what I've always said, darling. How is a poor girl to know? There

was myself and Jack Kildare—but never mind," and for once the reminiscence died away.

"I was thinking of Reggie all alone out there," said Iva, with far-away eyes, "and wondering what it was like, and what he did, and whether he had really forgotten us—I mean forgotten that we were more to him than other people. And somehow I couldn't help hoping that he hadn't. I *couldn't* think of him dangling after some other girl. When he wrote about sport in the jungle, and nights among the Himalayas, I did not mind; but then, I thought, what will *he* think when he hears about *me*? How will he feel? And I had just got to that—at that very moment ——"

"Oh, oh, oh!" Lady Tilbury shivered in sympathy.

"*There he was!—he himself!* The light was bad—it was very misty down in the village, much worse than up here, and things took odd shapes—but I *couldn't* be mistaken.. It was either Reggie or no one. If it were not Reggie, it was almost more awful. I can't tell you what it was like."

"Well?" said Lady Tilbury softly. "And?"

"I turned to rush away, but he called after me. Ought I not to have stopped? But I don't believe I could have run if I had tried. I seemed turned to lead. Then he came for-

ward, and it was more ordinary—I mean he explained being there, and was dreadfully sorry for having startled me, and was just like himself—at first.”

“It was Sir Philip’s death which sent him over?”

“Yes. He has come to arrange about the funeral. Sir Philip died the night before last. The announcement will be in the papers tomorrow; it was too late for to-day. Reggie was sent for from India; Sir Philip had been ill for two months; and Reggie arrived a week before the end. Sir Philip was very anxious to be buried here, among his ancestors. He is to be brought over on Sunday night—oh!” she ended, with a sudden catch in her breath.

“He told you all this before he said—ahem—anything else?”

“Yes.” Iva’s head drooped.

“And for the moment you forgot all about Mr. Druiitt?”

“Oh, yes.”

“For how long, Iva?”

“For — oh, I don’t know.”

“Have you any idea how long you have been away from the house?”

“Have I been long?” Iva looked up surprised. “I was afraid I should find Mr. Druiitt

still here. Why, of course, it is pitch-dark!" looking round.

"Reggie must have been very engrossing."

"Ah, dear mother, don't talk like that—it all comes back upon me now." She flushed and paled anew. "Don't be afraid. I—he—we——mother, I told him the truth—God helped me to do it."

"And—and how did he take it, Iva?"

"He would not believe it."

"Not believe it?"

"Would not believe that I could be so——he said that it was all a mistake; and when I cried—for I could not help crying—it seemed as if he knew everything. Oh, mother, does anybody ever deceive the *real* one? Does he not always know? I did try, I did indeed; I told Reggie I felt myself as good as bound——"

"What did he say to that?"

"Said it was nonsense," sobbed she—and saw not the smile upon the face above her.

"Well, what is to be done?" demanded Lady Tilbury, after awhile. "This is a strange day's work. What is to be the next move? Where is that wicked, malicious boy? I suppose I must see him."

"I don't know where he is. He said he——"

"Well?"

"Was coming here," murmured Iva, looking

frightened to death. At the same moment the door opened.

"I don't wonder that you can hardly look me in the face, sir," said Lady Tilbury rising, as a tall figure towered between her and the light. "What is this I hear? Terrifying this poor girl out of her senses!"—her hands were fast in his as she spoke—"and giving me a miserable hour, thinking her lost! And ——"

"Dear Lady Tilbury!"

"For shame, Reggie! I'm not old enough for that sort of thing yet."

"Dear Lady Tilbury, just one little favour."

"One little favour? I'll answer for it, it's not a *little* favour."

"You are right. It is not. But, great or small, I know it will be granted. For old sake's sake, Lady Tilbury."

"Let me hear it, at least."

He drew nearer, and bent his head again, but this time his lips did not touch her cheek.

"Dear Lady Tilbury, won't you just—go away?"

A great deal had to be explained. First of all, it had to be made clear that the new Sir Reginald was not quite the penniless youth who had taken leave of his friends and his native country three years before.

Sir Philip, whose demise had been quite unexpected, had, wonderful to relate, turned over a new leaf as regarded money matters directly he found himself in possession of the handsome sum of money paid by Mr. Druitt for his ancestral estate. A balance at his banker's sobered him. He no longer gambled. He even turned penurious, and the habits which poverty had rendered necessary gradually re-asserted themselves after the first burst of affluence was over.

In consequence, he was not merely able to bequeath the thirty-five thousand pounds to Reggie entire, but it was well invested, and likely to bring in an increasing income. This came upon Sir Philip's heir quite as a surprise; and our young soldier lost not a minute in pursuing the dictates of his own heart. He had never forgotten Iva. Whether he might or might not have done so had the term of his banishment been extended it boots not here to conjecture; but he had only been exiled long enough to make her dear memory spring to life with the first chance of reunion, and he had hurried over, growing ever more and more eager and fearful as the distance betwixt the two lessened.

"But—good Heavens! if I had known it was such a near shave as this!" said he, with

Iva's head upon his breast—and he was actually silent for a full minute afterwards.

For, in spite of all their joy, there was an ugly shadow in the background. Mr. Druitt must be told; Iva must abase herself before him.

Mr. Druitt had not returned to the house. He had been about to do so, when a light figure flew up the portico steps before him—Iva having taken a roundabout way, fearful of the encounter—and seeing her safe, he had with instinctive delicacy retreated. He would not force his presence where it might be unwelcome. The morrow would be soon enough for an explanation.

But he received a letter that night.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONCLUSION.

"REGGIE, I cannot believe it! It is *impossible*!"

"You may well say so, Lady Tilbury. I said it myself; I am saying it still."

"It is the most —— Reggie, did you ever hear of anybody's doing the like? People will think him mad."

"Of course they will. I am not sure that I don't."

"*You?* You that he has ——" But she saw that his face was not his own. It was working strangely; her own began to twitch. She sprang from her seat and battled down emotion which grew alarming.

"Does Iva know?"

"I don't know how I am to tell her. I wanted him to tell her, but he said 'No'—that it would be better hearing from my lips—or something of the kind. I think, you know"—lower—"that he funk'd the idea of playing the generous benefactor. Even with me he hurried it over, making as little of it as he could."

"The noble creature! The *good* man! O Reggie, you did—did thank him! Pah! *Thanks!*" The tears rolled openly down her cheeks.

"That was just what I felt, dear Lady Tilbury. *Thanks!* It seemed too ridiculous!"

"Not only to restore to you your own beautiful place, but to—what did he call it—how did he put it? You can't be his heir, while he is alive."

"I am to be in the position of his heir, with an adequate income to live at Old Cary Hall."

"And—he ———?" She held her breath for the answer.

"He leaves the neighbourhood. According to himself," said Reggie, turning his head aside, "all neighbourhoods are alike to him. He has but to begin over again, and it is easily done. If you had heard him, Lady Tilbury, you would have thought it was but an old shoe, or, we'll say, a worn-out hunter, that he was making me a present of. A mere nothing—that he had no longer any use for. The old place was more to me than it could ever be to him. He had no claim upon it—no association with it. People had been very kind to him, and he had spent a very pleasant three years of his life here, and hoped he had restored the house and grounds

according to my taste. You may guess what I was feeling!"

A pause.

Then: "Nothing was said about Iva, I suppose?" said Iva's mother restlessly.

"There was—something said."

"Oh?"

"I had rather not repeat it, if you don't mind. You may be sure it was nothing that was not kind—kindness itself—but it was between us two. He spoke of his great respect for Iva, and his great desire to make her happy—it was only—I had a sort of fancy; perhaps I was mistaken; I will not repeat what he said, but it gave me an impression, and I think it was meant to give it ——"

"What? Dear Reggie, what impression? Reggie, you might just give *me* the impression too. I won't repeat it any more than you—but, Reggie, you *might*!" No one could ever resist Lady Tilbury when she said "You *might*". She had such a little imploring note; such a willing, witching eye.

"Well, you see, Lady Tilbury, he had known Iva for a long time, and never given her a thought."

"Strange, but true, Reggie. Yes?" she nodded, clinging to his arm. He should not escape her, now he had got so far.

"And he had been happy enough among you all before any of this began."

"Yes. Oh, yes; he seemed perfectly happy."

"It was an awkward thing for a man to hint; but what I felt was that once he had got over the disappointment, and the shock, and altogether, he would—things would right themselves again pretty soon. It was not as if he had ever been desperately in love. Indeed, I doubt if he is a marrying man."

Lady Tilbury unclasped her hands, and shook herself free. Then she threw a withering glance at the unconscious young man, upon whom her arts had been so effectual. "That's all you know about it!" quoth she disdainfully.

Ten minutes later Iva met her mother hurrying across the hall in outdoor attire. "Go into the drawing-room," cried she, scarcely stopping to speak. "Reggie is there, and has something to say to you."

"But where are you going?"

"I am going," said Lady Tilbury defiantly, "to Old Cary Hall."

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It was a raw, misty evening, an evening precisely similar to that of the preceding Saturday, on which, it will be remembered, so

much took place ; but Lady Tilbury, heedless of weather and of the gathering darkness, hurried along, engrossed solely by the purpose which took her abroad. She might be met—she might be seen and remarked upon, possibly even delayed—but one thing she would not be, and that was, turned back. She was going to tell Mr. Druitt what she thought of him, if ten thousand obstacles stood in the way.

Mr. Druitt was alone ; and—oh, how terribly alone he looked!—such a little, solitary figure in the huge hall!

And Lady Tilbury had been used to see him upon horseback, or driving his high dog-cart—or, at any rate, stepping about erect and gay, with head well up, and shoulders well thrown back ; she had never thought of him as a *little* man before.

But crouching over a low fire, with a forlorn droop in every feature, and—truth compels the detail—only a pair of thin old slippers on his feet, which took off at least an inch from his height, he presented such a picture of pitiful insignificance that her woman's soul was stirred within her.

She could not blame Iva. How should a girl of Iva's age look below the surface? Yet here was one of the finest natures God ever made, encased in a small, shrunken, grey-coated figure!

(Thus did it present itself to her ; she exaggerated—but she generally did exaggerate ; and she now cast such a halo over the very curves of Mr. Druitt's melancholy back that he might veritably have owned a hunch and she would not have allowed it.) Her eyes swam ; her hands involuntarily went out before her.

.

“ Indeed, you make too much of it, dear Lady Tilbury.”

“ Too much ! Oh, if you knew, Mr. Druitt ! ”

“ All you say —— ”

“ If you knew what I feel and don't say ! There's not a word I've spoken but ten were behind it. Let that be. Mr. Druitt, Mr. Druitt, it's here upon another errand I am. If my daughter has befooled you, let the mother — arrah ! I *can't* say it ! Stupid, blind man, can't you see for yourself ? Can I say more than I have said ? Sure, I don't need to throw myself at your feet, do I ? I'm not so young and pretty as Iva, but people tell me that — that —— ”

“ Young ? Pretty ? Lady Tilbury —— ” In the dim light, with the rush of colour on her cheek and the sparkle in her glorious eyes, it seemed to Mr. Druitt he had never beheld a woman more divine ; he was shaking from head

to foot with a new and wonderful agitation ; nothing he had ever felt for Iva came up to this. He struggled for speech, but she was quicker, and ran on.

"I could make you happy. I know I could. I know men's ways. Sir Thomas loved me dearly ; so did my poor Jack Kildare ; and—and Tilbury Court would be at your command ; you would go on living amongst us ; and we are all so fond of you—we think so much of you—there would be one voice if it was said you were to leave us. Don't go, there's a dear man ; *don't go !*"

Was there ever a stranger woman ? She had only thought of it within the last half-hour, and here she was pleading as if her very life depended on his answer.

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"Now I don't mind in the least if the whole world knows," cried she, wiping her eyes, the scene over. "I mean, of course, Reggie and Iva, for it's no business of any one else. And no one else need ever know there was such a thing as another idea. You couldn't have refused me ; it would have been such a disgrace ; and you are too polite a man to disgrace any woman. And if you say it was a generous thing to do ——"

"The most generous I ever heard of!"

"I had to cap you, Mr. Jabez Druiitt. You were giving all you had ; there was nothing left for me to do but to give all, and myself into the bargain."

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"I fairly took his breath away!" confided she afterwards, 'twixt laughing and crying. "If it had only been leap-year! But sure, why should I mind? I don't mind—I won't mind. He has got to take me ; and you may laugh if you please, but I tell you he's a little bit in love with me already. He brought me to the door, though he wouldn't come in ; but I don't think he has gone back to sit huttering over the fire, poor little miserable man—tut! what am I saying? He's an angel from Heaven—but he did look a shrimp in that big place. *I'll* make him happy. I know men's ways. Sir Thomas—but there, this isn't the time for Sir Thomas. If you had seen how he cheered up, Iva, as we talked it all over! He and I here—you and Reggie at the Hall—oh, it's wonderful—it's more than wonderful! But no one must ever have an inkling of this night's work. It must be a secret for ever and ever—mind that, you two."

She was alone with her own especial two.

Iva seized one hand, Reggie the other.

"You dear, dear, dearest of mothers!"

"God bless you, Lady Tilbury."

Lady Tilbury beamed upon them both. "It *was* rather a nasty thing to have to do," said she complacently.

But we may be sure the confidence was never divulged. No one ever suspected the secret of the double engagement which unravelled a certain matrimonial problem; for though Miss Lossett was tenfold more indignant at the fair widow's capturing her *rara avis* than she would have been had Iva done so, she rated Lady Tilbury's charms too high (having already suffered from them) to suppose that if Mr. Druitt could get her he would ever have thought of her daughter.

Mr. Druitt was three years older than his bride, and it turned out directly the marriage was announced, that every one had been expecting it ever since Mr. Druitt came to the neighbourhood. The only wonder was that the event had not taken place more speedily.

The great point for public decision now was, would Lady Tilbury keep her present designation or not? Lady Tilbury said she should—for Maud's sake.

"It is always for somebody's sake, you know," Sophia retailed the decision at the Deanery.

"Every one does it, and always for somebody's sake."

Thereat the dean's eyes twinkled as usual ; but Mrs. Chancellor was true to her still lamentably unprodigal son. "If it *is* always done, and always for somebody's sake," said she severely, "I do not see why Lady Tilbury should be an exception to the rule. We all know Lady Tilbury *as* Lady Tilbury. A change of any sort would be awkward now." The speaker paused, then settled the matter with a wave of her authoritative hand. "We all like and respect Lady Tilbury, and wish her every happiness in her—ahem—new marriage." For the life of her, the worthy lady could not repress the little attribute.

There was, of course, some consternation among the Tilbury girls over the prospect of a step-father ; but this was partially balanced by the delightful excitement of two weddings. It then occurred to Lady Tilbury as desirable to send Maud for a long tour abroad, she having received an invitation which exactly suited her ; and by the time she returned she was so much taken up with all she had seen and done, also with preparations for her first London season, that no trouble was to be apprehended at her hands. Indeed, as Lady Tilbury trenchantly remarked : "No one who has not tried it

knows the difference there is between taking about an heiress and a pauper". Iva was ten times prettier than her half-sister, but Maud came back engaged at the close of her first season.

Detached from her influence, the younger girls grew up harmlessly content and happy. Mr. Druitt became much beloved by them; he took more notice of them than any one had ever done before; and whenever they were in disgrace with their mother, they went to him to have matters adjusted.

As for Jabez himself, "God bless my soul!" cried burly Amos, whose teeth had been drawn for ever by his never-to-be-forgotten dinner-party at Old Cary Hall, "you wouldn't know Jay! Married a baronet's widow—an uncommonly fine woman. One of the highest families in the county. No end of swell relations. Lives at Tilbury Court, and presented his own place to Lady T.'s eldest daughter." After a moment's rumination: "We thought it was the daughter he was after, the missis and I, when *we* were down there among them all!"

But Puddington, M.F.H., fancied that he had never been deceived; and it said something for that brutish squire that his friendship for Jabez Druitt continued unabated. Perhaps he still has hopes, in spite of all.

And Reggie and Iva reign at the old Hall, and if any one in Somersetshire ever hears of a romantic marriage, or of hopeless lovers gloriously re-united, they are sure to nod and smile :
• “Just like Sir Reginald and Lady Goffe!”

